

Murder Begins At Home

by
DELANO
AMES

HODDER & STOUGHTON
ST. PAUL'S HOUSE, LONDON, E.C.4.

To

MEL AND ELEANOR GRAY
who are responsible for
much that I "would most
willingly recall"

CHAPTER I

DAGOBERT has an aunt named Clotilda who lives in Detroit, so when we disembarked in New York, we bought a second-hand car and drove to New Mexico. "It's more or less on the way," he explained.

I am not good at maps, but from Farewell, Texas, Detroit appeared to be in one direction and New Mexico in another, and realised there was a catch in it. I broke the rule about not talking to the driver and pointed this out. Dagobert acknowledged it.

"Since we've got this far . . ." he suggested airily.

I shrugged. "You have to change the tyres."

I settled back to enjoy the scenery. In theory I was taking notes on the scenery for *My American Journal*, which Dagobert said I was going to write. The scenery from Farewell to the borders of New Mexico consists of three frame windmills and a few Coca-Cola signs. My mind began to wander.

Then I sat up suddenly. "Doesn't Miranda live somewhere in New Mexico?" I said.

"What's that?" he grunted. He concentrated hard on what appeared to me to be a straight stretch of completely empty road.

"Miranda," I repeated sweetly. "Miranda Ross. Surely you remember Miranda."

The car swerved gently. "Damn!" he said with a patience acquired during a two-day trek across Texas. "Rear, offside. I'm getting a kind of feeling for it."

I followed him around the car to inspect the flat tyre, a hammer in my hand. "Of course, she must be getting a little long in the tooth," I said. "The war has been over for a long time. I wonder what people like Miranda do when there's no war to win?"

"Not the hammer, Jane, the jack-lever," he said.

"If you're going to be technical," I complained. I rummaged

in the dicky—locally called, if I decipher my notes correctly, the bumble seat—and emerged with a long steel object with a handle at one end. Dagobert accepted it, so it must have been a jack-lever.

I continued. "It's not that I have anything against Miranda personally. . . . Apart from the fact that she is extravagantly beautiful, fabulously rich, and terrifyingly clever, she is doubtless a very worthy creature. And I suppose you feel one ought to keep in touch with one's old Service buddies."

"Monkey-wrench," Dagobert said crisply.

I fetched it. He was on hands and knees by this time, and I knew that the old bitter struggle with the jack had recommenced. I thrust the thing at him tentatively.

"You mustn't be disappointed if she has changed since the days of those snapshots she gave you," I said. "I especially liked the one in the tin hat and the distant clouds of battle: Captain Miranda Ross inspecting ack-ack installations on the Anzio beach-head. And the one of her sunbathing in the officers' rest camp at Capri. I dare say her *figure* hasn't changed. Much."

"That," said Dagobert, "is a screwdriver, not a monkey-wrench. Not that I don't appreciate your efforts to be co-operative, Jane."

I tried again. When I returned with the monkey-wrench, Dagobert was grovelling in the dirt, conversing in soft undertones with the jack. It was perhaps not the best time to pursue the discussion.

"I wish I had met Miranda in her prime," I mused. "A wife ought to know the companions of her husband's youth so that she can keep up an intelligent interest in the conversation on long winter evenings."

As I said this, it occurred to me that Dagobert had not, in fact, mentioned Miranda's name since our arrival in America—a sinister detail, for normally she was one of his pet subjects of reminiscence. She was his war experience.

"Does Miranda expect us?" I asked. "I mean, do you keep in close touch? Or do we just rely on Western hospitality?"

A grimy hand grasping something which looked like a crow-

bar appeared from under the axle. "Hold this," Dagobert's voice ordered.

I held it wistfully. For some reason Miranda always made me think wistfully of blunt instruments. I suppose, in a way, I didn't really like her.

"Will we get there to-night?" I asked.

"I doubt it. Not unless we walk. Where?"

"Palo Alto—or whatever Miranda calls her adobe hacienda."

I don't know whether Dagobert arranged it or not—he will sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to avoid a simple answer to a simple question—but at that moment the jack made a horrible rasping sound and the car sagged discouragingly into the ditch. Dagobert swore and nursed a bruised thumb.

"Can I help?" I asked sympathetically, remembering how wonderful Miranda had always been with motor-cars when they broke down in the deserts of Tunisia. "Or should we take the thing to a garage?"

"There ought to be a garage any twenty or thirty miles now," he nodded. "You make notes on the scenery. Jot down your impressions of America while they are still fresh in your mind."

I should, of course, have followed this advice. My plan was still an *American Journal*. I had even made an entry: "September 2nd, early morning. Arrived New York. Missed Statue of Liberty and skyline, due to Dagobert lingering over breakfast." It was absurd to waste time brooding about a woman my husband had once admired.

And yet, as it turned out, this instinct was sound. My first view of the Pecos valley at sunset was memorable but evanescent; the impact of Miranda and the people at Palo Alto is still as real as ever. The former—all whorls of gold and streaks of yellow and crimson—I would willingly recall; the latter—a more sombre canvas—I cannot forget. For the harmless travelogue I had proposed to write turned out to be a story about Miranda—and about murder.

Dagobert fixed the tyre—I don't quite know how. The novelty of the next hundred miles of our journey was that we did not have any more flat tyres. The radiator boiled instead:

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We reached the Pecos valley, saw the sunset referred to above, and spent the night in Roswell. I had a shower, and the car had something called a reverse-flush. We went to a Western movie which we had seen and enjoyed very much last spring at the Empire, in Kensington High Street.

Next morning we drove along a tarred ribbon road laid across the pale pinky-beige folds of the prairie towards a ragged wall of blue mountains. We wound through grey-red canyons, which looked as though they had been there since the beginning of the world, and climbed into green valleys, where the scent of pine and juniper was sweet and pungent. We passed through towns with rolling names like Carrizozo, Tularosa and Alamogordo.

We were a few miles out of Alamogordo when Dagobert suddenly exclaimed: "Jane, I've got an idea! That American WAAC I used to know during the war, you know, Miranda something-or-other, lives somewhere in these parts. We might call on her, shall we? Now what was the name of the place?"

"Palo Alto is the next turning on the left," I sighed. "I've been learning about maps."

CHAPTER II

THE curious thing is that we were not given quite the riotous welcome Dagobert had expected. He was all for rolling up at the front door with whoops of joy. "When Miranda and I visited the Old Forum in Rome together," he told me, "she distinctly said, If you're ever in Alamogordo, do look me up."

In spite of this pressing invitation I persuaded him to telephone from the nearest filling station. It was on the corner of the main highway and the stony side-road which wound up to the Palo Alto ranch about a mile away. It was called "PA'S PLACE," and place describes it perhaps more adequately than filling-station. It was a wooden shack with a corrugated-iron roof. On the front porch a huge man in a tattered, broad-brimmed straw hat—surely Pa himself—sat in a rocking-chair watching the world go by.

He stopped rocking, and observed us with friendly interest as we came on to the porch. "Howdy, folks," he said pleasantly.

We said howdy and passed through the screen door. Pa's Place was a store and restaurant as well as a filling station. It sold chewing-gum and sheep-dip, candy bars and horseshoe nails, funny postcards and shotgun shells. A sign over the counter said: "If you think you're tough, Try one of our Steaks."

While I was noting these details, Dagobert was addressing the girl who stood with hands on hips behind the Coca-Cola cooler. She was appraising us coolly—or rather she was appraising Dagobert coolly—with wide dark eyes. She wore cheap earrings, which dangled as she put her head on one side, a vivid scarlet blouse, and a tight-fitting black-silk skirt. She wore no stockings, and her shoes, a size too big for her, were run over at the heels.

Dagobert, glancing through this description, says that I have somehow missed the essential Yolanda. He says I've forgotten her voluptuous yet satirical mouth, her white teeth, the sheen of her black hair which fell in waves down to straight slim

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shoulders, the clear olive complexion, the proud swell of his bosom. These are his phrases, and I record them just to give the masculine viewpoint. There was, I admit, something about Yolanda.

"*Tiene usted un telefono, señorita?*" Dagobert said.

I recognised the sentence from the Spanish phrase book we had bought last night in Roswell—besides, I knew he was looking for a telephone. I was impressed. So, apparently, was Yolanda, for she broke out into ripples of delighted merriment. She acknowledged my presence for the first time.

"He's cute, isn't he?" she said.

"He can do card tricks, too," I told her.

"The telephone is just beside you, mister." She turned again to Dagobert with a smile I can only describe as come-hither. "You're leaning against it." And she went off into a rapid string of voluble Spanish, which amused her anyway.

Dagobert said: "Quite—er—quite," and began fumbling through the telephone directory. He found the number, but I fancied that the Mexican girl, still staring at him and going off occasionally into little private fits of giggles, was putting him off his stroke. I diverted her attention by purchasing something called a Hiya-Toots.

Yolanda disappeared into the back of the store, less, I imagine, from motives of tact, than from sudden boredom with us, and Dagobert got on to Miranda. I stopped chewing Hiya-Toots and listened.

"It's Dagobert," he said, as though he were Ulysses returning from a ten-year voyage. There was a pause. Evidently Penelope was trying to place him. "You know. Dagobert Brown."

"If she doesn't remember the Dagobert part she'll hardly remember the Brown," I pointed out.

Dagobert glowered at me, and assumed his most tenderly evocative voice. "Surely you remember, Miranda. . . . Rome. Yes, Dagobert. The tall, good-looking one, with red hair. . . . That spring in Rome . . . the Old Forum at sunset and the statue of . . . an. . . ."

"Peter Pan?" I suggested.

"Look," he protested into the telephone, "my wife's here. Must I go into details?"

"Do by all means," I said, "if there *are* any details."

"Yes, my wife Jane," he continued. "Didn't I tell you about her? No, of course, it was before I knew her. . . . She's a good sort, the quiet, domestic type. In her spare time she writes books about people getting murdered. You know, bodies in the bath-tub. Have you a bath-tub? I mean, we are in the neighbourhood, motoring through."

"*Through* is good," I nodded.

"About a mile from Palo Alto, at Pa's Place. Oh, you know it!"

There was another long pause. Somehow I sensed that Miranda was not giving him explicit directions how to find the road between Pa's Place and the ranch. We were obviously getting the quick-freeze. The conversation became vague and languished. We were, I learned with interest, driving down to El Paso, and into Mexico.

"For several months, I hope," Dagobert was saying. "Yes, if we are, we'll let you know, of course. Meanwhile, it was fun hearing your voice again. . . . Cheerio."

"Try one of these," I said to him when he had hung up. "They're called Hiya-Toots, and should be delicious with Root Beer. I never liked Miranda. Now it can be told."

He looked more puzzled than hurt as he munched on my candy bar. "I can't make it out," he murmured.

There was a discreet and sympathetic mumble from the doorway.

"Me, neither," said Pa, who had risen from his rocking-chair and come in to be neighbourly. He pushed back his tattered straw sombrero and mopped a perspiring forehead with a blue cotton bandanna, letting the screen door bang behind him. "Say, I'm right sorry Mrs. Ross didn't ask you up to Palo Alto. They got a mighty pretty ranch there." He seemed considerably more distressed about it than I was myself.

We murmured something intended to display indifference, and watched him fumble in the pockets of his blue jeans. I had a feeling that he was going to produce something intended

to console us for our disappointment—a stick of chewing-gum perhaps. There was a paternal benevolence about Pa which had doubtless earned him his soubriquet. His rotund face, with its three or four days' growth of beard, radiated geniality.

He finally found what he was looking for, and my intuition was not far wrong. It was a nickel. He crossed the room and put it in the slot of the Monster Wurlitzer automatic gramophone. The thing sprang into instant life, and Pa's Place was filled with crooners.

"Reckoned maybe you'd like a little music," he explained. He unhooked a fly-swatter from a nail on the wall, and took up sentry duty on an upended packing-case behind the counter.

"Do we go?" I asked Dagobert.

"We can't, until the record's finished," he reminded me. "I keep thinking about Miranda."

"Because she didn't immediately urge us to spend a month with her?" The juke-box at least permitted us to converse privately under the shelter of its barrage.

Dagobert ran his fingers through his hair. It isn't red, it's sandy. But he is tall, and to impressionable women like me—and Miranda?—good-looking, I suppose. "There is that, too . . ." he confessed.

I tried again. "It wouldn't be because of me?"

He shook his head decidedly.

"Some women," I persisted, "are odd about old admirers turning up with wives."

"I'm *not* an old admirer."

I stared at him. He looked deadly serious. "You're not!" I exclaimed. "Then how on earth do you describe it?"

"I am interested in her."

I smiled brightly. "Interested. I see. A nice distinction."

He ignored my faint bitterness. "Miranda Ross is one of the most interesting people I have ever met," he said. "To tell the truth, I knew her very slightly, but I've never forgotten her. She was the pet of Allied Force Headquarters. Everyone admired her, everyone who worked with her relied on her. She was unfailingly charming to everyone; she did everyone's work. She ran

AFHQ. Like yourself, I've been wondering what people like Miranda do when there's no war to win."

"Oh, so you *were* listening when I said that," I murmured. "Go on. You were saying you knew her very slightly."

He grinned a little self-consciously. "I'm afraid I've deceived you about Miranda, Jane. She was my great failure. I never got a look in. Like most of my colleagues, both British and American, I may have been vaguely enamoured for a time, but . . . nothing doing."

"What about those luscious snapshots sunbathing on Capri?"

"I pinched them from the editor of the *Stars and Stripes*," he confessed. "She let them be taken by the Public Relations people, who said they'd be good for troop morale."

Though I know Dagobert's skill in making up a convincing story, I was beginning to believe him. It had been one of the corner-stones of our domestic life that Dagobert had once been romantically entangled with a glamorous American beauty called Miranda Ross. I had once even tried doing my hair the way it was done in one of Miranda's photographs, an effort which, parenthetically, Dagobert never noticed.

"What about the Old Forum in Rome at sunset?" I said, feeling slightly dazed.

"It was a kind of Cooks' Tour arranged by Special Services. There were ten or twelve of us."

I readjusted my thoughts. Without Miranda to quarrel about, there was going to be a blank in our future marital relations. Perversely, I began to feel a little annoyed with Miranda for not being madly in love with Dagobert. Most women, I suppose, profoundly believe their husbands to be irresistible to other women.

"Why did we drive out to New Mexico?" I asked.

"Because since early childhood my favourite fiction has been Westerners," he confessed. "The odd part of it is that I hadn't thought of Miranda until you suddenly mentioned her yesterday at Farewell."

"Well, well," I said. "There ought to be a moral in that somewhere. Tell me more about Miranda. Now that we're not

going to see her, I'm fascinated. Start at the part where you were 'vaguely' enamoured. You, and the rest of the army of liberation."

"The rub seems to have been one Julian," he said. "Rumour had it that she and this Julian exchanged letters twice a day. Julian wasn't in the Services; he had some sort of reserved occupation, looking after the Palo Alto ranch, I believe. Julian Ross was her husband. Probably he still is."

"Yep, that's right," Pa contributed from behind the counter. We had not noticed that the record was finished. "Still is, and I reckon always will be."

Dagobert nodded, taking Pa into the conversation. "In brief, the ideal couple."

"Yep, that's right," Pa confirmed. "Like two turtle doves." He brought his fly-swatter down smartly on a wasp which was crawling along the candy bars. "One, anyway," he added. It was uncertain whether he referred to turtle doves or wasps. "Sometimes," he pursued, "I think she's too good to live."

This promising line of conversation was interrupted by the honk of a car which had drawn up by the petrol pump outside. Pa eased his bulk off the packing-case and made for the door.

"Don't rush off," he said hospitably as the screen door slammed.

Dagobert's attention seemed to be engrossed by the Hiya-Toots wrapper. He winced as he read the list of ingredients which composed it.

"He's put his finger on the enigma of Miranda," he said thoughtfully. "Too Good to Live. Or maybe it's Too Good to be True. I think I'll have a Coke."

While he opened the bottle I watched Pa greet the driver of the car outside. They were apparently old friends.

"What can I do for you, Doc?"

"Five gallons of regular, and you might check my oil, Ferguson."

"Sure, Doc. How about water?"

"I filled up at Palo Alto."

"He's come from Palo Alto," I said to Dagobert. He was ruminating over his Coca-Cola, and I thought he hadn't heard.

"It's a small world," he nodded, sipping the drink delicately through a straw.

He may have been only "vaguely" enamoured of Miranda, but I knew he was still thinking about her.

"I'm inclined to plunk for the second theory," I said. "Too good to be true. But since it's been ordained that we are not to see her, let's talk about Mexico."

"But *why* didn't she ask us up?" he rumbled. "She remembered me all right."

"Of course she did, my dear." I patted his hand soothingly. "In fact, maybe that's it."

My attention wandered again towards the car outside. I spotted a black instrument case on the front seat, and decided that "Doc" was not a courtesy title, but a valid indication of profession. The doctor was a pleasant-looking young man dressed in a dark conventional suit, with which, as a concession to the district he practised in, he wore a light pearl-grey Stetson. What, I wondered, had a doctor been doing up at Palo Alto, and had that any bearing on Miranda's lack of hospitality? Pa Fergusson obviously wondered the same thing, for he said:

"Any of the folks sick up at the ranch?"

The doctor's manner was professionally uncommunicative. "Nothing much. Just a routine visit."

"The old man again, huh?" Pa screwed back the oil cap. "You'd think the stuff 'ud kill him. I guess it will eventually."

The doctor made non-committal sounds and paid for the petrol. Pa Fergusson gave him his change.

"Sometimes, Doc, I don't know how she stands it." He lowered his voice so that I had to strain in order to hear him. "She's just a mighty remarkable woman, I guess."

For the first time the doctor's vagueness deserted him. I saw his face as he looked at Fergusson and his eyes were solemn. Perhaps I exaggerate, but I thought they were touched with awe; indeed, with something like adoration.

"Mrs. Ross," he said gravely, "is a saint."

"I reckon that must be it," Fergusson agreed. "Hurry back, Doc."

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The car started, and Fergusson came back into the shop. usual the screen door caught me unprepared.

"Sorry," Pa apologised—for his absence, not the door. "That was Doc Carter. He's a swell fellow, Doc."

I agreed, and said we must be on our way. Fergusson seemed disappointed.

"I kinda hoped you'd stay around until my boy Larry come in," he said, seating himself again on the packing-case behind the counter. "I'd kinda like him to hear you two rippin' away." This was totally mystifying until he added: "Larry spent two years in Leighton Buzzard, doncha know? Jolly old Leighton Buzzard, what?"

"What?" I echoed, not getting it for a second. Then, as I recognised what is known in America as the "Oxford" accent, I hastened to add: "Oh, sure. Quite."

By this time I should have been familiar with the fact that one-half of the young males in the United States were once stationed in Leighton Buzzard or other parts of the British Isles, which, until I visited America, were only vague names to me.

"All kidding aside," Pa soothed, "I love to hear that English dialect. It kinda tickles me, but I love it."

He paused expectantly, waiting for us to rip away. I glanced wildly at Dagobert, but he too was temporarily tongue-tied. We ought to practise a duologue for these occasions, something starting with, "I say, old bean," or words to that effect. I broke what might have turned into an embarrassing silence by pointing to a metal object on Pa Fergusson's chest and saying: "What's that? I've been dying to ask, but I didn't like to."

Pa glanced down at it, polishing the shiny surface with his sleeve. Pride and depreciation mingled in his voice as he explained. "That's a Deputy-Sheriff's badge, lady," he said.

Both Dagobert and I were thrilled. Memories of the Sheriff's posse, of cattle rustlers, of heading 'em off at Dead Man's Gulch, red in our imaginations. Pa's next words were dampening. "It don't mean much," he said a little regretfully. "I once staked a nigger who was drunk and makin' a nuisance of his-

The reminiscences of Deputy-Sheriff Fergusson did not seem especially promising. Dagobert suddenly said:

"Who's the old man?"

"What old man?"

"The one up at Palo Alto who is ill."

"You see," I explained, "we like to listen to your talk too."

Pa conceded the point with a good-natured smile. "I guess you heard me jawing with Doc Carter," he said, poising his fly-swatter cautiously above the counter. "It's Mrs. Ross's father. Old man Voigt. He's quite a character in these parts." He brought the swatter down viciously, and flicked the dead fly from the counter with satisfaction.

"What's old man Voigt do besides drink?" Dagobert inquired.

"Nothing," Pa stated simply.

Dagobert finished his Coca-Cola, reached towards the pile of Hiya-Toots, recoiled with a slight shudder, and lighted a cigarette instead. Then he said conversationally: "What have you got against old man Voigt?"

Pa not unnaturally looked surprised. I think Dagobert had been reading a meaning into the viciousness with which Pa had exterminated the fly which wasn't there.

"Me?" Pa removed a toothpick from his mouth and put it back again. "I've nothing against old man Voigt, nothing at all. . . . Say, that's my boy Larry now, coming in the back door." He seemed relieved to change the subject. "He's been in Alamogordo on business. He's a smart young fellow, my Larry. You're going to like him. Say, what did you tell me your name was?"

"Brown," Dagobert supplied.

We all looked round hopefully, but it wasn't Larry. It was the pretty Mexican girl again. Dagobert helped himself to another Coca-Cola, evidently prepared to stay awhile.

"Oh, it's you," Pa growled. "Been out titivating yourself again, huh? How's about unpacking that canned soup?"

I had thought of Pa Fergusson as a mild man incapable of anger except against flies. I was surprised at the venom in his voice.

"It's Yolanda," he explained to us, lowering his voice to a stage whisper which was clearly audible to the girl herself. "She's Larry's . . . well, I guess she's Larry's wife," he concluded lamely.

"As you say," Dagobert remarked admiringly, "Larry's a smart young fellow."

"It was the only dumb thing he ever did," Pa continued bitterly. "He had to up and marry *that* a week before he went abroad."

"He didn't have to," Yolanda corrected. "He ran around like he had ants in his pants, threatening to shoot himself. And I thought he was cute! Was I smart!" She tossed her head and her black eyes flashed. "Cute!"

I thought this was the beginning of a family row, but apparently such scenes held no novelty for either Pa or his daughter-in-law. Pa merely grunted.

"Get on with them cans," he ordered curtly, and Yolanda surprisingly obeyed. "She thinks anything that wears pants is cute," he told us.

I glanced at Dagobert. "Yes," I said, "I noticed."

Pa's voice became confidential. "We had a bit of trouble with her during the war," he said. "But what can you expect with greaser trash like that?"

I was dying to know, but delicacy forbade my asking. Unfortunately, another car at that moment drew up outside, and Pa went out to deal with it. Yolanda took a long, lingering look at Dagobert, and again disappeared into the back regions of the store.

"What are we waiting for?" I suddenly asked.

"Now that you mention it, what *are* we waiting for?" Dagobert said.

While we were still wondering, the telephone rang. It rang quickly three times, paused, and then rang three times again. I looked at it curiously, wondering if it meant anything.

"It's a party line," Dagobert explained. "Different houses have different rings."

"Should we do anything about it?"

"Yolanda will hear it."

But Yolanda did not reappear. The three rings continued. There is something irresistible about an unanswered telephone. Not to answer it is like not putting your tongue in the hole left by a missing tooth. I glanced hysterically outside, where Pa was flat on his paunch under a Buick limousine, picked up the receiver and said, "Hello."

Two people were already talking. I was about to say "Sorry" and hang up when I heard a familiar name.

The name was Miranda, so I held on and listened.

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is quite comfortable here, and besides, she's not feeling too well, one of her headaches again. I can leave her here in the hotel."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" The crisp incision of Miranda's voice took both Dwight and me by surprise.

"I only thought . . ." he began.

"If you come, Sue is coming with you. I want that to be quite understood."

Dwight got it, I think, a second later than I did. Miranda had let herself be persuaded.

"Does that mean I—we can come?" he dithered.

Miranda's laugh was soft and delicious, an audible smile rather than a laugh. "I suppose I really can't let you—and dear Sue—motor through Alamogordo without visiting Julian and me."

It might have been a graceful giving in—or she may have intended the conversation to end this way all along. I couldn't decide. Anyway, Dwight's technique had been considerably more successful than Dagobert's.

"Cocktails on the patio at six?" she concluded.

Dwight agreed eagerly, and all three of us hung up.

"Cocktails on the patio at six," I repeated to Dagobert. "Half a dozen empty guest-rooms, and not one for an old war buddy. You must have a rotten line. Oh! . . ." I broke off with a guilty start, observing that Pa Fergusson had returned. "I—er—the telephone rang. I answered it, kind of."

Pa regarded me with his normal benevolence. "I heard it," he nodded. "Three rings—that's the ranch. We're four. Like some more music?"

"We really must go," I said.

"Who else lives up at Palo Alto?" Dagobert asked.

Since it was obvious we should never see Palo Alto, I felt that the question was supererogatory, but I listened for the reply with rapt attention. Such is the effect on the aspiring novelist of constant preoccupation with one character. Even then I had begun "to put Miranda into a book." I saw her as Doc Carter's "saint," Pa's "mighty remarkable woman," Dagobert's "ideal" wife. I

CHAPTER III

ONE of the best things about gathering copy for novels is that you can, with a clear conscience, pry into other people's private affairs, peek through keyholes, and listen in to telephone conversations. Besides, I believe that listening in on party lines is one of rural America's chief diversions. I kept my ear glued to the receiver.

I missed the beginning of the conversation, but it was not difficult to infer. A man was speaking. He sounded, I thought, a bit huffy.

"Of course, if the house is full, we'll quite understand. Only it seems a pity to be so near . . . and not see you, Miranda."

"It isn't that, Dwight. . . ." It was a soft, agreeable voice, patient, gentle, a little tinged with weariness. "There are half a dozen spare guest-rooms. There's no one here except the family. It's only . . ." The voice faded away in a sigh.

This was maddening. Only what? With admirable self-control I restrained myself from saying it aloud. Dwight didn't help matters by saying: "Yes, I know. . . ."

I cannot bear these heavily veiled conversations, all hints, innuendoes, and sighs. I should have taken a bet that Dwight didn't know at all. When he continued, the huffiness in his voice had become patient but hurt resignation.

"I've got the score of 'Alabama' with me. I did rather want you to hear it before I turn it over to the M.G.M. people. But if it can't be, it can't be." As well as writing music for the movies, Dwight was a philosopher too.

"I wanted to hear it so much," Miranda said. "Obviously."

Why obviously? And was she weakening? I had an idea that gentle, sympathetic people like Miranda did not weaken unless they wanted to. Anyway, Dwight tried.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said, changing tactics. "I'll drive over by myself, right now, and bring the manuscript along. Sue

is quite comfortable here, and besides, she's not feeling too well, one of her headaches again. I can leave her here in the hotel."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" The crisp incision of Miranda's voice took both Dwight and me by surprise.

"I only thought . . ." he began.

"If you come, Sue is coming with you. I want that to be quite understood."

Dwight got it, I think, a second later than I did. Miranda had let herself be persuaded.

"Does that mean I—we can come?" he dithered.

Miranda's laugh was soft and delicious, an audible smile rather than a laugh. "I suppose I really can't let you—and dear Sue—motor through Alamogordo without visiting Julian and me."

It might have been a graceful giving in—or she may have intended the conversation to end this way all along. I couldn't decide. Anyway, Dwight's technique had been considerably more successful than Dagobert's.

"Cocktails on the patio at six?" she concluded.

Dwight agreed eagerly, and all three of us hung up.

"Cocktails on the patio at six," I repeated to Dagobert. "Half a dozen empty guest-rooms, and not one for an old war buddy. You must have a rotten line. Oh! . . ." I broke off with a guilty start, observing that Pa Ferguson had returned. "I—er—the telephone rang. I answered it, kind of."

Pa regarded me with his normal benevolence. "I heard it," he nodded. "Three rings—that's the ranch. We're four. Like some more music?"

"We really must go," I said.

"Who else lives up at Palo Alto?" Dagobert asked.

Since it was obvious we should never see Palo Alto, I felt that the question was supererogatory, but I listened for the reply with rapt attention. Such is the effect on the aspiring novelist of constant preoccupation with one character. Even then I had begun "to put Miranda into a book." I saw her as Doc Carter's "saint," Pa's "mighty remarkable woman," Dagobert's "ideal" wife. I

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saw her as the "perfect" woman—with only one flaw in character; namely, that she murdered people. My mind, of course, works that way.

I listened for Pa's reply in order to fill in her background. Perhaps among the people at Palo Alto I could find a suitable victim. Pa considered.

"Well, there's the old man, like I said." He sat down and reached for his fly-swatter. "Then there's her sister, Miss Peggy. And the kid."

"Whose kid?"

"Theirs," said Pa, somewhat vaguely. "And of course there's Hal." His face became wreathed in smiles at the thought of Hal. "There's a crazy guy for you."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Like I said"—Pa tapped his forehead—"plumb loco."

The description may not have suited a psychiatrist, but we let it pass. "Ever hear of anyone called Dwight and Sue?" I asked.

Pa shook his head. "Nope." He recapitulated, counting on his fingers: "Mrs. Ross, old man Voigt, the kid, Miss Peggy, and Hal. That's the lot."

"What about Julian Ross?" Dagobert said.

"Him? Oh sure, *him*. He's there." The tone was not exactly contemptuous: it was impersonal. He might have spoken the same way had we inquired whether they had running water and electricity.

"What's he like?"

Pa poised his fly-swatter. "Who?"

He may have been purposely obtuse, or it may simply not have occurred to him that anyone could actually be interested in Julian Ross.

Mr. Ross."

"Oh, Julian." The fly crawled away unswatted. "Julian's all right. . . . Say, it's a shame that boy of mine don't come."

... . Couldn't make out whether we were being snubbed or not. Anyway, it looked as though this negative picture of Julian was going to get. Dagobert made motion

parture. He paid for the candy bars and soft drinks, and Pa became professionally genial. He had got to the "hurry back, folks," and we to the screen door when the telephone rang again—this time four rings.

Yolanda emerged from the back regions and answered it. "The foreigners?" she said. "Yeh, they're just leaving. Okay. She threw a flashing smile over her shoulder towards Dagobert. "It's Miranda—for you. It's a good thing you hung around."

She gave him the receiver, letting her fingers brush lightly against his hand. I saw what Pa meant about having trouble with Yolanda during the war. They were going to have post-war problems too.

Dagobert said "Hello," and at the same time Pa shouted out: "Hey! Here comes Larry. Golly!"

The last exclamation was too much for me; I abandoned Dagobert and joined Pa on the front porch. The "Golly!" was occasioned by the sight of a long, sleek roadster turning into the filling station from the Palo Alto road, a sumptuous monster of red and chromium, so obviously brand new that you could almost see the price tag on it. It swerved dashing, and stopped with a tear of gravel immediately in front of us. A young man in a wide beige sombrero, with lean, sunburnt features and bright blue eyes, looked up at us from the driver's seat with a slow grin of self-conscious pride.

"Well, Dad, what do you think of my Chrysler?" he drawled.

"What do you know!" Pa Fergusson admired. "Where did you get her? Who's she belong to?"

"To me, of course," Larry laughed. "But I'll take you for a ride some time."

He got out. As I had anticipated, he got out by leaping over the door without opening it. Both Pa and I regarded him with admiration, Pa because he admired everything about his boy Larry, and I because he was so perfectly the preconceived picture I had of the South-western cowboy. He was about six feet two, slim waisted, apparently hipless, and lithe as a wild cat. His silk shirt was of a red and yellow check. His whipcord

trousers were tucked into elaborately sewn cowboy boots. He wore a carved leather belt about three inches wide, with a colossal silver buckle set with turquoise, though disappointingly no six-shooters hung from it.

Either he was the typical cowboy, or else he and I had been to the same films. I watched him showing his father the radio on the dashboard, which had *two* aerials, the buttons you pressed to make the windows go up and down.

But Pa's enthusiasm for these fine things was not unalloyed. I heard him say doubtfully:

"She mustta cost plenty. It's none of my business, son, but can you afford her?"

Larry slapped him on the back. "Why, sure," he said. "Why not? I'm a smart fellow. Let me show you the engine."

They disappeared under the bonnet, and I glanced back towards Dagobert. I heard my own name and listened.

"Yes, her name was Jane Hamish," he was saying. "That's the name she writes under. . . . You did? I'm delighted to hear it. I hope you bought your copy and didn't get it out of the library."

It was very flattering, Miranda's apparent interest in my literary career, but it didn't seem to have much bearing on our present situation. I wondered how the subject had arisen. Pa and Larry stepped on to the porch before I heard any more. I was formally introduced. Pa seemed to think we'd probably met before, since Larry had spent two years in Leighton Buzzard.

Larry removed his right gauntlet and took my hand in a powerful grasp. His bronzed face crinkled into the gentle smile of strong man meeting little woman. For the first time in days I was conscious of my appearance, and wondered if my nose was shiny.

"I reckon Larry must of wakened you Britishers up a bit when he was over yonder," Pa commented.

"I reckon he must of, at that," I agreed indistinctly. There was no doubt about it—he would have played havoc in Leighton Buzzard.

I said, "How-do-you-do" and he, in his soft, friendly voice,

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"Pleased to meetcha, ma'am." I'd heard Gary Cooper on the screen do it the same way, and I was willing to take a small bet that Larry had, too. "Are you staying in these parts, ma'am?"

"Yes," said Dagobert, joining us rather abruptly, I thought. "We'll be up at the Rosses' ranch. We've had a pressing invitation for the week-end."

CHAPTER IV

Our invitation may have been pressing, but there were still no brass bands out to welcome us. In fact, Western hospitality continued to leave me unimpressed. Our dusty road had climbed insidiously in a series of ruts and bumps through rocky fields sparsely dotted with cactus and yucca, mesquite and tumbleweeds—all prickly things. We had not yet noticed that the distant Organ Mountains were rising in a purple range of pipes across the vast white desert sands behind us, nor that, as we climbed, the air became cooler and shot with the scent of cedar. I hadn't yet reconciled myself to the week-end—it was only Thursday, anyway—and was still seeing the worst side of everything.

"El Paso sounded much nicer," I said to Dagobert. "Why did Miranda change her mind?"

"I don't know," he admitted slowly. "Oddly enough, it's *you* she seems interested in. Your literary career, apparently. I hate to be unkind about an old fellow-soldier, but I believe she hopes you'll put her in a book."

"She'll regret that," I said, not very convinced by this theory.

We had jolted over an iron cattle-guard in the road and passed a sign which said PALO ALTO RANCH—PRIVATE ROAD. It was not a stately drive. It wound through a collection of low adobe mud out-buildings, from which Mexican children peered at us curiously. One waved at us; it was the nearest approach to enthusiasm that our coming aroused.

The road widened into a sweep, which curved in front of a long, low ranch-house, half hidden by clumps of cottonwood trees. At first sight the Palo Alto ranch-house was as perfectly my ideal Western ranch-house as Larry Fergusson had been my ideal cowboy. A second glance showed, however, the hand (Miranda's?) of civilisation.

Two wings, or rather arms, had been added to the primitive structure, so that what had been originally a long ranch-house

porch now overlooked a wide patio, where azaleas and bright orange pyracantha grew in tubs. The fourth side of this courtyard was enclosed by a whitewashed wall, pierced by an arch with wrought-iron gates which looked like—and probably were—Italian Renaissance workmanship.

There was nothing meretricious or Hollywood about Palo Alto; it was deceptively modest and unassuming. It gave you the sense of being spacious, comfortable, and homely rather than grand. The excellent taste of its designer did not hit you between the eyes; the evidence of vast amounts of money spent on it was not instantly visible.

Nor, indeed, was our hostess.

We drew up beside a group of other vehicles parked near the wrought-iron gates, a station-wagon, a couple of farm trucks, and a new sedan of popular make. We saw no one, except an aged Mexican who regarded us stolidly from the doors of the stable opposite. Two horses, saddled and hitched to the whitewashed wall of the patio, turned their heads to look at us and a fat, sleek dachshund barked, wagged its tail, and began to approach, but changed its mind.

"Do we honk or walk around the patio clearing our throats?" I asked. "Or do we turn around and go to El Paso? Just for the record, remember, I suggested the latter."

At that moment a man came across the patio and emerged through the arch near us. He wore a grey flannel suit and a brown felt hat. He carried a light tweed overcoat over his arm.

We watched him optimistically. He ignored us, and threw his overcoat in the sedan beside which our jalopy was parked. He was about to get in himself when Dagobert asked him politely if the Rosses lived here.

He came to at once—I think he had been too occupied with thoughts of his own to notice us previously—removed his hat and held out a hand.

"You must be Miranda's English friends," he said. "She'll be delighted you got here. I'm Julian Ross."

I looked at him with new interest. I now understood a little of Pa Fergusson's difficulty in describing Julian Ross, for I have the

same difficulty. He was a man of about thirty-five, with almost no distinguishing features. He was neither fair nor dark, his eyes were a neutral colour, somewhere between brown and grey, and he was of medium height. In fact, all the descriptive adjectives which come to mind in discussing Julian Ross are words like medium, neutral, average. He was not exactly a nonentity; he was, as it were, too much of a nonentity to be a genuine nonentity. You had the impression of a real person from whom the essential character had been sucked out. *Hic jacet* Julian Ross, I found myself fantastically thinking, only he was still on his feet.

"Unfortunately," he was telling me, "I'm just off to El Paso. I go down every week to see my cattle agent. We do business over a steak and glass of beer. But I'll be back after dinner some time, about ten-thirty with luck. You'll be staying for a while, I hope." He glanced over his shoulder restlessly. "Some of the others ought to be around some place." He reached into his car and honked the horn. But no one came running. "I don't know which room Miranda's putting you in, but maybe I could help you carry in your things."

We said not to bother as he was in a hurry, and he looked at his wristwatch. "It's just a little after five," he said, "and it takes me less than two hours to get to El Paso."

I couldn't make out whether this meant he had plenty of time or was in a tearing hurry. Not being able to think what to say, I told him how charming we thought the ranch was.

His face lit up. "Do you think so?" he said with a naïve pleasure. "Do you really think so? I was born here, you know. My father was one of the genuine old-timers." He swept the surrounding landscape with a lingering gaze, half of pride, half of wistfulness. "I used to know and love every stone, stick and stump within twenty miles of this place."

"Don't you still?" Dagobert said, struck as I had been by Julian's use of the word "used."

"Of course," he said hastily. "Only it's changed. It's been immensely improved. The house used to be nothing but a rambling shack. Now it's a—but you haven't been inside. I think

you'll like it. Everyone does. Miranda's taste is unusually good. Everyone says so. . . . Now where could she be?" He smiled at us frankly. "This is a helluva way to welcome people."

We had been joined by a small, dirty-faced boy, who was gaping at us as though he saw something odd and faintly distasteful. He was about six, and had large black eyes, long curling lashes, and a shock of black hair. He was dressed in the levis, or blue jeans, which are almost the native costume of the Southwest.

"Winthrop," Julian said. "Go and tell Mother that the—that her English friends are here."

"I don't know where she is," the child replied, not removing his fascinated gaze from us.

"Then find Uncle Hal or Aunt Peggy."

"Don't know where they are."

"Then look."

Winthrop ignored the suggestion, and continued to stare at us. "I know about you," he said. "You're foreigners. I'm a dirty, low-down half-breed."

Possibly it was some childish game, like playing Indians, but the announcement was disconcerting. I saw Julian bite his lip, but the next minute he was laughing cheerfully as he leaned down and ruffled the child's mop of hair.

"You're dirty, all right," he agreed. "Now beat it. Go find Uncle Hal and wash your face."

Winthrop now fixed me exclusively with his gaze. "You write books with pictures in them," he stated.

I smiled gently. The pictures were an elaboration, but I could see my reputation had preceded me. "And do you like pretty picture books, Winthrop?" I asked sweetly.

"No," he said. I could see that Winthrop and I were not going to have many cosy chats over the week-end. "I like rattlesnakes," he added.

At that moment a thin, emaciated man, like Winthrop and Pa Fergusson, ambled up, wearing the standard levis and tattered straw sombrero. At least we were beginning to attract a crowd. The new-comer's face was wizened like his body, weather-beaten

and all crinkles, which gave him at first glance an appearance of being older than he was. He was whittling on a stick with a long lethal-looking jack-knife, a task in which he was so absorbed that he didn't notice us for a moment. When he looked up, the million crinkles of his face were lit by a smile of uncommon sweetness.

"Hi!" he said, addressing us. "I thought you weren't coming until to-morrow."

He held out a cordial hand. He was obviously thinking of someone else, but I took it.

"May I introduce my half-brother, Hal Perkins," Julian said. "Mr. and Mrs.—er——"

"Dagobert and Jane Brown," Hal completed. He may have been crazy, as Pa said, but unlike Julian, he remembered our names.

"Hey! That's my knife," Winthrop shouted suddenly, making a dive for the weapon with which Hal had been whittling.

There was a sharp scuffle, from which I averted my eyes, expecting the child to lose a finger at least. He didn't, and a moment later bore off the knife in triumph to test its point against our spare tyre. Hal volunteered to show us to our quarters while Julian glanced again in a marked manner at his wristwatch.

"Are you okay for money?" I heard Hal murmur.

Julian started slightly and again bit his lip. He was not, I gathered, okay for money. "I suppose *you* haven't by any chance——" he began, but arrested himself as Hal shook his head. "All right," he concluded with a sigh that was half-controlled irritation, "I'll have to ask her, I suppose." He came over towards us, politely apologetic, but this time in an undisguised hurry.

"Hal will show you your rooms. If you'll excuse me, I must rush. I've left something in the house. We'll meet later this evening. *Adios*." And he departed at a smart pace towards the arched gate. I saw him run across the patio and disappear into the house.

Winthrop too had now disappeared, leaving only a scar or two on our spare tyre, in search, I trusted, of rattlesnakes. Hal, insisting on carrying our heaviest suitcase, showed us to our room.

At the door of our room we left the homely, careless atmosphere of an old-fashioned ranch-house and entered that of a luxury hotel. The transition was startling. We had come in from the patio itself, where wicker chairs and garden furniture and swinging settees covered with pleasantly faded striped canvas were scattered informally over the cobblestones through which grass grew untended. Inside the influence of the interior decorator was everywhere. The furniture was white polished sycamore. A thick, dull-blue carpet completely covered the floor. An original Matisse hung on the wall. Between the twin beds a bookcase, invitingly filled with the newest novels in brand-new jackets—I noticed among them one of my own—supported a graceful Lalique reading-lamp. A half-open door afforded a glimpse of our private bathroom, tiled to the ceiling with quaint and whimsical marine creatures.

It wasn't much like the Tourist Camps we'd been staying in. Hal hesitated at the door. Like ourselves, he seemed a little overwhelmed by such splendour. He explained that Miranda had arranged a second similar room for Dagobert, and looked doubtful when we insisted that we could rough it together in here.

"Come in," Dagobert finally suggested, realising that he was longing to.

He entered hesitantly, removing his hat and instinctively shuffling his boots as though to clean them before crossing the threshold.

"Miranda sure has done wonders with this old place," he murmured, awe-stricken. "When I was a kid, the hired hands used this room as a bunkhouse." He tugged at the string of a packet of Bull Durham cigarette-tobacco which dangled from his shirt pocket. "Do you mind?" he asked.

While we unpacked we encouraged him to talk, not that he needed encouragement once he got started. The act of rolling a cigarette seemed to restore his confidence. Hal, too, had been born in the Palo Alto ranch thirty-eight years ago. He and Julian, four years his junior and the son of their mother's second husband, had run wild—as he put it—until Julian had gone East to Yale. Hal hadn't gone to university. "I wasn't so bright, I guess," he explained.

In a way he wasn't so bright, but he certainly wasn't crazy either. He had a childish, simple way of expressing himself which was rather endearing. I liked his voice, a Western drawl much more marked than his brother's. Sometimes he got mixed up about exact times and places—in the way he'd thought we were coming to-morrow, for instance—but in the main his words made sense.

Julian, we learned, had met Miranda during his last year at Yale, or maybe it was in New York. Anyway, they were married, and when they came back to Palo Alto Miranda had fallen in love with the old ranch.

"She started right away fixing it up," Hal told us admiringly. "Even before Mom died. Mom sort of liked it the way it was. She was funny that way," he added wonderingly. "Then I bummed off to El Paso, and tried to get a job, and then there was the war. They wouldn't take me in the Army, so I kind of mooched around and helped some in those new shipyards down on the Gulf near Galveston, and when Miranda came back from Germany she insisted on my coming to live with them again. So I did."

He fell silent, studying his very dirty finger-nails. Possibly their state reminded him of something, for he leapt to his feet suddenly.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "There's company for supper. I gotta clean up." He meticulously gathered together the half-dozen cigarette butts he had smoked and put them into his pocket. "Sure nice knowing you all." And he bolted from the room.

We bathed, changed into clean but crumpled clothes, and at about a quarter to six ventured out into the patio. The heat of the afternoon had become a mild glow of warmth, and the sun, low in the west, seeped gently through the leaves of the overhanging cottonwoods. Above the low whitewashed fourth wall of the courtyard the mountains had become a deeper, theatrical purple. They formed a backcloth in a distance which was strangely without perspective. They might have been twenty miles away, or two.

As I gazed at them, an object in the foreground suddenly distracted me. It was a familiar sedan driving rapidly away from

the front of the house, the car Julian had put his things into. I caught sight of Julian himself at the wheel, his featureless face rigid and constrained. Evidently the errand which had sent him back into the house had taken considerably longer than he'd expected.

CHAPTER V

THE patio was still deserted. We could certainly not accuse Miranda of being one of those hostesses who never leave you to yourself for a moment.

"We're going to be lonely in this huge house," I said to Dagobert, "never seeing anybody."

I had spoken too soon. As we turned the corner of the cloistered walk which edged the patio in front of our wing of the building we halted abruptly. We were staring into the muzzle of a double-barrelled shot-gun.

"I hope," I said, as the gun remained levelled straight at my face, "that thing isn't loaded."

"Oh!" a man's voice grunted. "That's what's blocking the view."

The gun was lowered, and I began to breathe more easily. The man clicked the thing to and leaned it against the wall of the house. He had been cleaning it and squinting with one eye down the barrel.

"I'm sorry if I spoiled your view," I said, still a little nettled. He smiled at me, then winked broadly. "You have my full permission to spoil my view any time you like," he said gallantly. But that doesn't go for you, young fellow," he added, turning to Dagobert, and nudging him in the ribs. "My name's Voigt, sometimes called, behind my back, 'the old man,' but don't believe a word of it. Glad to see you. You're the Browns, aren't you?"

We shook hands with us heartily, giving mine a final paternal just to show there were no hard feelings. He was in his early 50s, tall, gaunt, with bushy black eyebrows beneath which shone cavernous eyes. The glazed look in those eyes was occasionally stirred by flashes of shrewdness and humour—or was it? The luxuriant white hair, not recently brushed, suggested an old man. He had been very good-looking once, and he was still

not without masculine attraction. I noticed that his white flannels, blue blazer, Princeton Club tie and polo shirt were immaculate, and belied the carelessness of the unbrushed hair and informal manner.

"Let's see, you'll want tea," he said. "You people always want tea, don't you?"

"We're very adaptable," Dagobert explained, cycling the promising display of bottles on a nearby table.

He followed Dagobert's eye and grew more cheerful. "Oddly enough," he said, "I was just thinking in terms of a small Martini. I couldn't interest you, I suppose?"

"You've already interested us."

He made us sit down, indicating a low table on which were bowls of olives and salted almonds. "Help yourself," he grunted. "They're supposed to make you thirsty, in case you need artificial aids."

While he made the cocktail he continued to talk, vaguely addressing his remarks to us, but giving the impression of a not very connected soliloquy.

"It's a funny household, this," he rumbled on. "Nearly six o'clock, and not one of them out here where reasonable people ought to be at six o'clock. I don't believe in drinking at all hours of the day—before breakfast, for instance—but six o'clock ought to be sacred. Even the pubs in England open at six. How do you like the South-west? I can't stand it. You haven't met my daughter yet?"

"No," I put in, in order to keep it a duologue. "But the news of our arrival will probably get around eventually."

"I mean Peggy," he said. "She usually has one about now. The Karnaks ought to be here too. He may write tripe, but at least he drinks like a gentleman. Which he isn't. You write too, don't you, Mrs. Brown?"

I didn't much care for the association of ideas, but I admitted it. "What kind of tripe does Mr. Karnak write?" I asked.

"Dwight? Stuff for the movies—music, I guess you call it. I don't. There was one about Miranda on a moonlit verandah. All the juke-boxes play it. He had a darn nerve, when you think of

it. Say, you just missed Julian, didn't you?"

We explained that we'd met him when we arrived an hour ago.

"He goes to El Paso once a week on business." Mr. Voigt poured out three cocktails, handing one to me. "Do you know what I'd do if I got away like that once a week? I'd go straight across to Juarez and find the lowest dive in the place and raise hell."

Juarez is the town on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande joined to El Paso by bridges.

"How do you know he doesn't?" Dagobert said.

Mr. Voigt's scowl was contemptuous. "I know Julian," he grunted. He drank down his cocktail and refilled the glass. "Not bad." He smacked his lips. "Though I'll be honest and admit that Miranda's Martinis are better. I don't know how she makes them. Never touches them herself, either. No, Julian just goes on business. He's the ideal husband. They're the perfect couple. Never a cross word, never a frown. I've watched them for years. They never relax."

He settled back in his wicker arm-chair, crossed his long legs, and sipped his second Martini thoughtfully. "Now I like a woman who breaks out occasionally, kicks over the traces, and tells everybody to go hang. . . ."

He spoke meditatively, almost reminiscently. I wondered if he were generalising, or if he had someone specific in mind.

He sighed deeply. "You get tolerant when you get to my age—too damn tolerant, maybe. But I say, to hell with pride. You only live once. Some people don't even do that." He fixed me with a glassy stare. "They live other people's lives instead."

"I see what you mean," I murmured uneasily.

"No, you don't," he contradicted, with a sudden disconcerting twinkle in his eyes. "Because I don't mean anything. Your glass is empty."

"Anyway, I see what you mean this time," I smiled. He filled my glass and his own, overlooking Dagobert, who was stroking the dachshund's ears.

Dagobert, who observes more than he appears to, glanced up. "To hell with pride," he said. "I'll have one too."

"You know the story of the ugly duckling," Mr. Voigt continued, as he filled Dagobert's glass. "That's my trouble. I don't deserve such a wonderful daughter as Miranda, and I can't get used to it. Darn it! Here are the Karnaks."

I had a preconceived picture of Dwight Karnak, derived from the sound of his voice over the telephone and his profession. I expected him to be slight, diffident, with thinning hair and pince-nez. The composer of "A Moonlit Verandah" and the coming super-smash musical "Alabama" was a big, hearty man, who looked like a successful stockbroker. Everything about him—the long Cadillac limousine, the panama hat, the cigar—was sleek, satisfied, and prosperous. So much for my womanly intuition.

Oddly enough, his wife Sue was not so unlike the image I had mistakenly formed of her husband. She was slight, and her manner was shy and hesitant. Though her gloves and handbag, her shoes and silver-fox furs repeated the same motif of worldly success which was stamped everywhere on her husband, you had an impression that she was only tagging along, on sufferance as it were, and having a pretty breathless time of it at that. She was still in her twenties—perhaps five years younger than Dwight—and pretty in a soft, kittenish way.

She greeted us effusively but in haste. "I must go in and find Miranda," she said. "It's been months. You will forgive me." She glanced towards her husband, who had poured himself a stiff whisky and was settling down on the settee beside Dagobert for a chat about conditions in England. "Dwight," she said. "Miranda."

There was a quiet authority in her soft treble voice which made me think again about her only tagging along after her forceful husband. Dwight, I noticed, put down his drink immediately and followed her meekly into the house.

"Tell Miranda she's got guests out here!" Voigt shouted after them, pouring himself a fourth Martini. "Fellow had a beard when I first saw him and never washed," he rumbled into his glass. "She was a cute little thing, though."

I imagined he was referring to the Karnaks; it required

imagination to interpret Mr. Voigt's conversation after four Martinis.

The impending monologue was staved off by the reappearance of Winthrop, startlingly transformed in a blue-and-white sailor suit which he obviously loathed. He had been recently scrubbed and looked unnaturally clean. He removed Mr. Voigt's glass from his hand.

"Miranda says you can't have a cocktail," he said, sipping the Martini himself, making a face, and tossing the rest of it into the patio.

Mr. Voigt took it with the tolerance he had mentioned. "Oh, Winthrop," he said, "I want you to meet some people who have come from England to visit us."

"I already saw them," said Winthrop, not interested.

"He's named after me," Voigt explained not without pride. "He's Miranda's child."

"I'm not either," Winthrop corrected. "I'm a bastard."

Voigt reddened. "Now, Winthrop, who on earth told you anything so silly as that?"

"Ah, heck!" The child turned away as though the subject bored him. "Everybody knows that." And he chased off across the patio, throwing stones at the dachshund.

"Adopted." Voigt lowered his voice confidentially. "Miranda and Julian have no kids." He scowled. "Doubt if Julian would even know how to go about it . . . I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brown."

I was spared the necessity of comment by the arrival in best Western style of a galloping horse at the patio entrance. A girl slid dexterously from the saddle, pushed open the gate, and strode towards us. She wore blue jeans rolled half-way up to her knees and a man's white shirt. She was hatless, and her straight fair hair had been blown in all directions by the wind. She wore no make-up, and she walked in her G-I boots as though she were going for a ten-mile hike. At first I didn't realise she was as old as twenty-three or four, and that with a little care she might be pretty.

"Hi, Dad," she said when she reached our corner of the

patio. "Soaking again? Where's Bill? Not that I give a damn." She became aware of our presence. "Hello—who are you? I'm the kid sister." She held out a hand. Her grasp was as rough and firm as Larry Fergusson's. Her father introduced us.

"Are you artists or writers or something?" she said. Like young Winthrop she was not, I thought, very interested. I noticed her eyes searching the patio. Her father said I was a distinguished novelist. "I thought so," Peggy nodded. "This place is becoming a goddam Cultural Centre. I saw Dwight's car outside. We'll have to have *that* to-night. . . . Where's Bill?"

"Who's Bill?" Dagobert asked.

"Just a guy. . . . Jeeze, I need a drink."

She wandered over to the table with the bottles and poured herself out a glass of—if my eyes did not deceive me—Coca-Cola. Somehow I had thought a shot of neat Scotch would be more in her line.

"That reminds me," Mr. Voigt muttered under his breath. I saw his hand reach stealthily towards the cocktail shaker. So did Winthrop, who had reappeared.

"No, you don't!" the child said, reaching the shaker first.

"Don't I?" the old man murmured vaguely. "Perhaps you're right. There are a couple of things I must do before dinner. You'll excuse me, won't you, Mrs. Brown?" And he wandered off into the house, obviously in search of a private bottle of his own.

The Karnaks came back, or rather Sue rejoined us while Dwight stood in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, whistling softly and staring in the direction of the sunset. Possibly he was giving birth to one of those masterpieces so dear to the hearts of the juke-box public. At any rate, he seemed to have forgotten our existence and, more significantly, the existence of his own untouched highball. Finally he turned and went back into the drawing-room. I heard him a few seconds later strumming on the piano.

And again Dwight Karnak jolted one of my preconceptions. For what he played sounded distinctly like a Bach fugue.

Meanwhile Sue greeted Peggy. "I adore your boy friend,

Peggy!" she enthused. "He's sweet—and so exactly right for you."

Peggy coloured furiously. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Bill," Dagobert suggested.

Sue nodded eagerly. "Yes, Bill McFarlan. Miranda whispered it all in my ear."

"Isn't that swell!" Peggy growled, flinging herself down in a wicker chair beside me. "Where is the big dope, anyway?"

"Helping Miranda with the *enchiladas* for dinner to-night," Sue told her.

"Since there are half a dozen paid Mexicans in the kitchen," Peggy remarked, "I don't quite see why my sister has to cook the *enchiladas* herself. She might pay a little attention to her guests."

I agreed silently, but Sue pointed out: "No one's *enchiladas* are quite like Miranda's."

"That's true. . . ." Peggy admitted. "What's Dwight playing?"

"The first C sharp minor fugue from the 'Well-Tempered Clavicord,'" Sue replied without hesitation.

I glanced at her. Her eyes were half-closed; I could see she was following the intricate web of sound as though she knew it note by note. The Karnaks continued to bewilder me.

"Oh," said Peggy, to whom the designation meant nothing. "Did he write it? I ought to dress for dinner, I suppose." She turned abruptly to me. "Do you mind if I don't? How long are you staying? Did you know Miranda in England? Hey, Winthrop, bring me another Coke!"

"When I get really used to the place," I said to her, "I'm going to take part in the conversation too. No, I didn't know your sister in England. I've not even met her yet, and I'm beginning to doubt whether there is such a person. Dagobert—that's the awkward stranger over there—knew her. Slightly. And I don't give a damn whether you change for dinner or not."

She stared at me: it was the first time she had really noticed my presence. "Didn't you say you were a writer?" she asked.

"Didn't Miranda invite you so you could read us the first chapter of your unfinished psychological masterpiece?"

"No."

"Let me give you a cocktail."

"Thank you very much. I need one."

She filled my glass, and I tactfully indicated Sue. Peggy nodded. "People always tell me how to behave," she murmured. "I guess I need it."

Sue refused a drink. As her husband finished the fugue, she had risen and was standing as though uncertain whether to remain or join him.

"If you'll forgive me," she smiled a bright social smile, "I'll go to my room for awhile. To tell the truth, I have a raging headache."

So the headache which I had heard about over the telephone at Pa's Place was not Dwight's imagination. Sue paused at the drawing-room door, suddenly remembering.

"Peggy dear, I forgot," she said. "You're to go at once and change into the new Bonwit Teller frock Miranda bought you. You've just time, but Miranda says she'll hold back dinner for five minutes if necessary."

Peggy, for some reason, glanced inquiringly at me.

"Scram!" I suggested.

She moved reluctantly towards the door through which Sue had already vanished. "Okay," she said. "How did Miranda know I hadn't changed?"

"Spies, probably. Or perhaps she just knows your sloppy habits."

She grinned. When she grinned there was an attractive dimple on her left cheek, at the moment slightly marred by a smudge of dirt.

"Could be," she admitted. "By the way, if . . . No, never mind."

"If Bill turns up we'll say you don't care a hang," I nodded. "And another thing. I don't know whether you've ever heard of lipstick. Men say they detest it. They don't."

"Who cares?" she said, striding off.

We had the patio entirely to ourselves. Even Winthrop and the dachshund had deserted us. Dagobert rose, grasped the cocktail shaker, and shook it. It, too, was empty.

"We've always got each other," he said consolingly. "What is it about us that repels people?" He began to mix another Martini.

"If we sneaked off quietly," I asked, "do you think anyone would notice?"

"Too late," Dagobert warned regretfully.

I glanced up to see that Hal was drawing near. He seemed pleased to find us, but of course he was supposed to be feeble-minded. He had changed into a suit which was too big for him. It was threadbare, but scrupulously cleaned and pressed. It had probably been made for his brother Julian.

"You write books about murder, don't you?" he said to Dagobert. "Could I have a Coke, please?"

"I don't. Jane does," Dagobert explained. "Do you like them?"

"No," Hal said, "but Miranda does. She never reads anything else."

"Really. . . ."

I saw something was troubling Hal. He seemed to find it hard to go on.

"She said something kind of funny a while ago," he said finally.

He put down the Coke which Dagobert handed him, and cleaned his finger-nails with the point of the same jack-knife Winthrop had taken from him. I found myself waiting for his words.

"She said she'd asked you for the week-end because you'd find plenty of material for a book," he concluded.

I smiled. "People always think their own lives and friends would make perfect books," I explained patiently.

The explanation didn't satisfy him.

"No." His face was a network of wrinkles. "She said you'd be interested in Palo Alto because . . . well, because she says there's going to be a murder. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

HAL looked up from his finger-nails anxiously as though for reassurance. I felt the smile of patient incredulity stiffen and become fixed around the corners of my mouth. I remembered Pa had told us that Hal was crazy, but I was only partially comforted.

"Put down that knife at once!" I said sharply, needing to say something and not knowing what else to say.

He put down the knife obediently and began rolling a Bull Durham cigarette. He continued to watch me with that same expression of anxiety. There was neither horror nor especial fear in his eyes, but the cigarette paper shook slightly between his fingers. The prospect of murder at least had him worried.

"When did Miranda say this?" Dagobert asked.

"Just now. In the kitchen."

"Were you helping her?"

"Yes, I burnt one of the *enchiladas*."

"And she said there was going to be a murder. . . ." Dagobert nodded. "Did she say whom she was going to kill?"

The beginnings of a smile twitched at Hal's lips, but he shook his head and looked worried again. "No, she wasn't mad at me about the *enchiladas*," he said. "Miranda never gets mad at any of us. She wouldn't kill a fly."

"Who wouldn't?" Mr. Voigt's voice boomed from behind us. "Miranda?" He steered a fairly straight course towards the improvised bar. I couldn't decide how much of our conversation he had heard. "Miranda?" he repeated. "Baloney! She hates the guts of us all. She must. Stands to reason. Come to think of it, I don't altogether blame her. Is Winthrop around?" he added in a more cautious tone.

Peggy, having done a record change into the Bonwit Teller frock, had also reappeared. She joined her father at the bar.

"No," she answered his question. "But *I* am. . . . All right. One small one, but I'll pour it."

Sue and Dwight also came out of the drawing-room, affectionately holding hands. It did not seem to be the moment to go further into Hal's startling theory as to why Miranda had invited us for the week-end. Examined, it would doubtless prove to be either a figment of his erratic imagination or else a harmless remark of Miranda's twisted in repetition. The sensible thing would be to ask Miranda herself what it was all about.

"I wish," I heard Hal murmuring to himself, "Julian was here."

Peggy had poured her father a drink, but instead of giving it to him she suddenly stiffened. "Help yourself," she muttered. "I'll have this one myself." And she tossed back the contents of the glass with a puzzling mixture of defiance and distaste.

I was puzzled only for a moment. A young man with dark, tousled hair and a pleasant smile had joined us. Sue introduced him, making significant facial contortions in the direction of Peggy. Even without these I guessed that the new-comer was the same Bill McFarlan who was so helpful in the kitchen.

McFarlan was about twenty-five, of slight but athletic build, and he spoke with an occasional stutter. With him we had presumably met every member of the house party. Except, of course, our hostess.

I glanced in vain beyond him, expecting that Miranda must at last be ready to make her entrance. We were like an assembled symphony orchestra waiting for the conductor.

While Sue explained to us that Bill worked at the Atomic Research station near Alamogordo, Bill himself edged towards Peggy, who was rather overdoing the indifference act.

"M-Miranda suggests we might go to the movies in Alamogordo after dinner," he said diffidently.

Peggy glanced at him as though she noticed him for the first time. "How nice of her!" she exclaimed caustically. "I've already been to the movies in Alamogordo. And as it happens, I'm going honky-tonking with Larry Fergusson in his new car."

"Oh," said Bill. "M-Miranda merely thought we . . ."

"Tell her to think again. No! Don't run and blab everything to Miranda—about Larry Fergusson, I mean. Is that clear?"

"Sure, only M-Miranda won't . . ."

Peggy turned her back on him abruptly. "Have a drink, Dad," she said.

The course of young love was not, it seemed, running smoothly. The introduction of Larry Fergusson into family life at Palo Alto struck me as a false note.

Sue, meanwhile, was telling me how wonderful Miranda had been to her and Dwight. I wanted to know about that, but it was increasingly difficult to pay attention to everything at once. Unconsciously, I think, my interest in the trivia of Palo Alto had violently quickened since Hal's provocative announcement. It was an artificial stimulus—like Voigt's salted almonds—but it made me preternaturally and morbidly observant. Like all over-eager observers, I probably missed those details—if any—which were significant.

I was becoming obsessed, for instance, with Miranda's continued absence. No one else seemed to find it in any way remarkable, so perhaps it was the custom of the house. I was also extremely tired and hungry. We had driven a long way that day, and the Hiya-Toots was a dim and rumbling memory.

Sue was now talking about her headache and complaining that she felt chilly. I had nearly forgotten about her headache, and suggested that she was probably dying of slow starvation. Peggy was more considerate. She at least ran back to her room and produced a light-green cardigan. Hal offered aspirin and Mr. Voigt suggested a drink. Dwight looked both solicitous and slightly irritated. I remembered his phrase over the telephone—one of her headaches again, pronounced in the tone of a man whose sympathy has been called upon so frequently that it has worn a little thin.

I will say for Sue Karnak that she realised entirely too much fuss was being made over her.

"I should have stayed in Alamogordo as we first arranged," she said to her husband. "If no one minds, I think I'll lie down for a while."

"Without any dinner?" Hal asked incredulously.

"I'm not a bit hungry." She smiled and rose firmly.

Everyone, except Dwight, argued; Sue, still apologising gently, retired. That was the last we saw of Sue that evening. We had another drink, desultorily discussing headaches we had known. Hal, who had reported Sue's retirement to Miranda, returned to say that Miranda would herself take a supper tray to Sue's room, and that the rest of us were to begin dinner without her.

We sat down, eight of us—the eighth was Winthrop—at a long, polished cedar refectory table which Miranda had acquired from a monastery in old Mexico. The arm-chair at the top of the table—Miranda's—was left vacant. As the meal progressed, I kept glancing at that chair. It began to get on my nerves.

Finally Winthrop, who kept getting up and down from the table and running from the room in a most unrestful way, returned to announce that "Mom's eating with that woman."

"She's sick," he informed us with gloating solemnity. "I guess she's going to have a baby."

The child, conscious that he was holding his audience, elaborated. "Mom's going to stay with her till it comes. Mom's as excited as an old rattlesnake. Maybe it will be a bastard like me."

In spite of Winthrop's attempt to enliven the conversation, the dinner party was a flop. Possibly the presence of a host and hostess might have helped. Hal remained anxious and meditative, old man Voigt, though he tried, was becoming alcoholically incoherent, Peggy and Bill continued their courtship in grim silence, addressing their rare remarks pointedly to everyone else but each other. In spite of the excellence of the *enchiladas*, which turned out to be a kind of thin maize pancake in a rich cream sauce in which I recognised onions, chilli peppers and cheese, we were all relieved when the Mexican maid said coffee was served in the patio.

It was deliciously cool in the patio, and the darkness was only broken by a yellow blob or two of shaded electric light around which insects buzzed. Over the jagged line of purple mountains a lopsided moon now hung in splendour. In the daylight I hadn't

noticed it; it might have been hung up there while we were at dinner.

I was frankly sleepy, and for the first time grateful that we seemed to be in a household where no one thought it necessary to be sociable—or even polite. I noticed Dagobert, too, stifle a yawn. Hal and Winthrop had wandered off, saying something about feeding horses. Dwight had remained in the drawing-room, and was playing Brahms' "Cradle Song" softly in the darkness. Voigt glanced up from a brandy balloon at the sound, muttering something about "damn juke-box trash." Bill was scowling in silence at Peggy, while Peggy herself, the only restless element, kept glancing from her wristwatch out across the patio. She looked, I thought, without a great deal of interest, a little tense.

Presumably somewhere in this large, rambling house Miranda sat with Sue Karnak and her headache. Anyway—and this seemed to me at the moment the only thing of importance—no one would care in the slightest whether or not I sloped off to bed.

I was entertaining this comforting thought when a car crunched to a halt in front of the patio wall. In the lamplight over the wrought-iron gate I caught a glimpse of glittering red and chromium. Peggy, dispensing with the formalities, bolted across the patio. I heard a motor horn: *toot-tootle-toot-toot. Toot-toot.* Obviously this would be Larry Fergusson's private honk.

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Toot-tootle-toot-toot. Toot-toot. I started from the edge of a nightmare (*enchiladas?*) with that same rhythm bridging the moment between dreaming and waking. I was shivering slightly, for at this altitude it gets chilly in the middle of the night. I felt for Dagobert, but he was not there. Then I remembered—single beds, Palo Alto, Larry Fergusson's new car doubtless bringing Peggy back from honky-tonking, whatever that was. Miranda. Miranda's words: someone is going to be murdered.

How had we been able calmly to go to bed with the enigma of those words unsolved, to lie here like lumps doing nothing! I felt an unreasoning fury with Dagobert, stretched out in the

next bed in swinish slumber, while I lay awake bearing alone all the burdens and responsibilities. He was supposed to be good at this sort of thing. Why didn't he do something? The trouble with Dagobert was that he was just an irresponsible playboy. We ought to be in Detroit, anyway, visiting his Aunt Clotilda. But that meant a job, for she had promised him a job in that factory she owned. A job meant he might have to work, and people like Dagobert didn't like to work. They preferred reading mediæval French poetry and letting their wives go threadbare. They thought it was fun riding around in an ancient jalopy which small boys jeered at while people like the Karnaks rode in Rolls-Royces. They'd rather snore in a drunken stupor than lie awake reflecting that there was a potential murderess wandering around the house.

"And another thing," I said aloud.

There was no response.

"Dagobert! Wake up! I'm talking to you."

I leaned over and gave the other bed a vicious punch. There was still no response.

"Don't pretend to be asleep," I sneered. "After all, it's of no possible interest to *me* if everyone in the house gets killed. They're your friends. Not mine, thank God."

He hadn't even the common courtesy to reply. I sat up abruptly and groped for the bedside lamp. Dagobert can't stand lights on when he's trying to sleep. I switched the thing on with satisfaction. Then I saw that Dagobert wasn't there.

I stared at the ruffled bedclothes in bewilderment. My husband is not, to my knowledge, given to nocturnal rambling. I put on a dressing-gown and slippers. It was, I noticed to my surprise, only about half-past eleven. I'd been asleep for less than an hour and a half. I cautiously pushed the door which opened into the patio. The patio was silent, except for the splashing of the fountain, and dark, except for a veiled moon and the lamp over the entrance arch.

There was no sign of Larry Fergusson's car, but he might have parked it at a distance from the house and turned the lights out. Or I may have dreamed that hoot. Or, for that matter, someone

else may have hooted. Julian, for instance, who had not returned from El Paso when we went to bed.

There was also no sign of Dagobert. I stood quite still for a moment shivering in the sharp night air. Then I observed that a faint light came from one of the rooms diagonally across the patio. I tiptoed along the cobblestones of the cloistered walk, turning where this afternoon we had first encountered Mr. Voigt and his shotgun. As I turned, my heart went into my throat, for I had the feeling you sometimes have in the darkness of a near but unseen presence, as if I had almost brushed past someone. I slipped forward hastily towards the lighted doorway.

I reached it without wondering what the room's occupants—if any—would think of my sudden apparition in *négligée*. I only felt a strong disinclination to return to my own room past that pitch-dark corner.

The room was the library, which connected with the big drawing-room where the grand piano was. It was a small room, book-lined, with a carved Spanish walnut writing-table, an open fireplace, and two or three deep leather arm-chairs. A man in a dressing-gown was sprawled in one of the arm-chairs, apparently engrossed in a large, technical-looking book. Propped against his ear was a telephone. It was Dagobert.

"I couldn't either," I said to him. "It must have been the black coffee after dinner."

He grinned up at me. "I don't know whether you catch it from me, or whether I catch it from you. We're a pair of saps, Jane. *I hope.*"

I was filled with instant shame at all the things I'd been thinking about him and with almost physical relief at finding him here. I pushed the heavy book from his hands and sat down on his lap. "I do love you," I said.

He held me tighter in response, but with his left hand kept the telephone propped against his ear.

"There's a horrible person lurking in a dark corner of the patio," I whispered.

He patted me absentmindedly. "Yes, of course," he murmured. "Who are you telephoning?"

"Yolanda, of course." He replaced the telephone on its stand reluctantly. "I've been ringing for a quarter of an hour. They must have all gone to bed."

I'd totally forgotten that Pa Fergusson was a Deputy-Sheriff. To telephone him was the obvious course. Threatened violence in Palo Alto was his pidgin, not ours. I bent down to pick up the book which had fallen to the floor. It was called somebody or other's *Treatise on the Tensor Calculus*, and seemed to consist mainly of strings of formidable mathematical symbols. Someone had made pencilled notes all over the margins.

"You can read it aloud to me in bed," I suggested. "In case we can't get to sleep."

The telephone rang—three rings. Three rings we knew was Palo Alto. Dagobert hesitated for the briefest moment and answered it.

It was a trunk—or rather long-distance—call. An operator's voice first spoke to Dagobert. She said: "This is El Paso calling. Is that Alamogordo Ten Eight Ten Ring Three?" Dagobert said yes, and she said: "One moment, please."

Then Julian Ross's voice took over. "Hello," he said; "Miranda?"

"No, it's Brown," Dagobert explained. "Everybody else seems to have gone to bed. Can I take a message?"

"Yes, if you don't mind. Tell Miranda I've been held up, and am spending the night here in El Paso. I'll be home first thing in the morning. If she's already gone to bed, better send a message to her room right away, if you don't mind. Otherwise she'll be worried."

At this point Miranda's own voice broke in. There was an extension in her room. She sounded sleepy, Dagobert says, as though she had just picked up the receiver.

"Hello, is that you, Julian?" she murmured vaguely. "Where are you?" Then less vaguely: "You *must* come home! You haven't any clothes with you."

Julian said something about picking up a shave in the morning from a barber and it being so late.

"It's only a quarter to twelve," Miranda pointed out. "If you

start right away you'll be home by half-past one. . . . I must say it's extremely inconsiderate of you, Julian. I had planned especially . . ." She broke off. "I'm afraid I must insist, my dear. We have guests, you know."

"Shall I hang up?" Dagobert put in.

Miranda had forgotten Dagobert was still on the line. Her tone of voice did not so much change—it had been gentle, coaxing, almost maternal even when she told Julian she *insisted*—but now you could hear the bright smile in it.

"I'm so sorry you had to hear our slight family *contretemps*, and I must apologise abjectly for not appearing this evening," she said. "Poor Sue has had a raging headache. I left her only half an hour ago when she finally fell asleep. I'm sure Jane will understand. Sue tells me Jane is charming and terribly intelligent. She's terrified Jane's going to put us all in a book!"

Even from where I stood, with my ear as close as possible to Dagobert's and the telephone, I could hear that same delicious rippling laugh I remembered at Pa Fergusson's this afternoon.

"We'll all meet at breakfast to-morrow morning," she went on. "I've arranged an excursion into the mountains on horseback. Good night, Dagobert, and say good night for me to your charming wife."

Dagobert said good night, and to my horror replaced the telephone receiver. But he lifted it carefully a second later.

The subsequent discussion between Miranda and Julian—of which I was able to overhear scraps—was not very interesting. Its subject-matter remained unaltered: Julian's immediate return from El Paso. The only surprising thing about it was that Julian won the argument. Miranda gave in.

She gave in quite suddenly, almost hurriedly. Dagobert and I glanced at each other.

"She's a great little giver-in," I said, remembering my previous perplexity when she had given in to Dwight.

Dagobert nodded thoughtfully. "Yes," he said. "I wonder who her sudden midnight visitor is?"

"Uh-uh!" I murmured, startled. "I hadn't thought of that."

It would certainly explain Miranda's abrupt conclusion: "All

right, Julian. Have it your own way. I'll see you some time in the morning."

"Hanky-panky?" I suggested hopefully.

"Maybe she's just glancing over the MS. score of 'Alabama,'" Dagobert shrugged. "In a way it isn't awfully our business. Let's go to bed."

Sue had fallen asleep half an hour ago. Dwight had pleaded this afternoon to see Miranda. Miranda, by breaking into Julian and Dagobert's telephone conversation, had prevented Dagobert from coming in person to deliver Julian's message. Yes, I rather liked the "Alabama" theory.

The trouble with theories is facts. As we recrossed the patio towards our room, we saw Dwight. He was just coming through the entrance arch, and we distinctly saw his face by the dim lamp over the gate. Miranda's midnight visitor—if she had one—was not Dwight.

We went to bed. We were both cold, and we got into the same bed. I felt myself drowsing off when Dagobert said:

"I wonder what she has 'planned especially'?"

I murmured something reassuring, already half asleep.

"Anyway," he mused, "if plans are put off, we can safely snatch a few hours' sleep."

"Yes, dear," I yawned, not really listening. "We'll see her in the morning."

We did see Miranda next morning.

She was dead.

CHAPTER VII

As a rule I sleep excellently from the moment the alarm clock goes off to the time when I finally stagger out of bed. Only on birthdays and when there's a train to catch do I awaken automatically with that faint, uneasy feeling that something—probably disagreeable—is about to happen. My conscience awoke me in this way shortly before half-past six the next morning.

"Dagobert," I whispered, "are you asleep?"

"Yes," he answered promptly. "I wish I had a cup of tea."

We lay in silence for five seconds, and then simultaneously sat up. "What's the use of trying to sleep," Dagobert complained, "with you kicking up such a row?"

We dressed sketchily and went out into the patio. The sun was streaming down, and the dachshund greeted us hilariously. A blue jay streaked brilliantly past, making a noise like a toy wooden rattle. A horse whinnied from the corral beyond the clump of cottonwoods. But of human activity there were fewer signs.

We walked through the arched gate and wandered around the ranch-house. The scent of burning juniper, mingled with that of coffee, drew us towards the kitchen quarters. The house was even bigger than we'd realised, being nearly as deep as it was long. Through an oaken door which stood ajar we saw that the high, whitewashed blank wall we had been following enclosed a small exotic garden, a kind of secondary patio, which formed a private approach to Miranda and Julian's quarters.

We passed it and proceeded towards the coffee fragrance. We heard voices talking in Spanish. The voices sounded excited, but Latin languages always do sound excited.

We were joined suddenly by Winthrop. He, too, looked excited.

"It was my knife that done it!" he informed us, his dark eyes ablaze with awe and pride.

"Done what?" Dagobert stopped abruptly.

"It went clear in—right up to the hilt!" the child went on breathlessly. "There's blood all over it. They won't let me have it. C'm on. Let's get it."

He had taken my hand and begun to drag me back towards the oaken door we had just passed. Dagobert's face was suddenly hard. I felt the child's hand grip mine tightly, and I realised he was not only excited but also frightened.

"I seen a dead coyote once," he informed us. "There was blood all over it."

We had entered the small walled garden by this time, and were following a cobblestoned path edged with rose bushes towards open french windows which led into a bedroom.

A white-faced maid stood on the steps outside the windows. It was Maria, who had waited on us last night at dinner. She looked scared out of her wits.

"Winthrop! Get out of here before I smack you down!" she threatened, working off her hysteria in anger.

Winthrop wavered, edging behind me for safety. "Aw heck," he said. "No one ever lets me have any fun."

Then he added something which made my blood run cold. It was spoken in a tone of blended fear and defiance, like a person who utters a blasphemy which he knows will condemn him to everlasting torment.

"I'm glad Mom's dead," he said. "I hate her."

He turned and fled from the garden, shocked at his own words.

"You'd better run after him," Dagobert advised me.

I should have liked nothing better, but I stood firm, fighting against an impulse to be sick. Marie was telling Dagobert what had happened. At six o'clock she had brought a tray containing a cup of black coffee to Mrs. Ross's room.

"Did she order it specially for six this morning?" Dagobert asked.

"No. I bring her coffee at six every morning."

He nodded, and Maria went on to say that she had put the tray down, picked up a book which lay on the floor, and then tiptoed across the room to draw the curtains.

I saw Dagobert eyeing the heavy blue curtains. "Didn't you

first switch on the electric light?" he said.

Maria looked doubtful, glanced back into the unlighted room, and shook her head as though some half-forgotten detail puzzled her.

"Wasn't it pitch-dark with the curtains drawn?" Dagobert prompted. "Too dark to notice a book lying on the floor?"

"No," Maria said. "It wasn't. It usually is. I usually switch on the light. . . . Oh yes, of course," she remembered suddenly, "this drape wasn't quite drawn. There was a crack of light coming through."

After throwing back the curtains Maria had turned round. She was surprised that Mrs. Ross hadn't said good morning as usual. "She always says 'good morning, Maria,' to me, just as nice as anything. Then I saw she looked kind of funny, all hunched up on the pillows, like she'd fallen asleep reading."

Then Maria had noticed that one of Miranda's bare arms hung from the bed, the hand almost touching the floor. The arm looked limp, but when Maria touched it it was stiff. She saw the congealed trickle of blood, and realised what it was that Mrs. Ross was hunched over. It was Winthrop's jack-knife; the smooth, black-bone handle stuck out just above the right breast.

Instead of having hysterics, Maria had gone at once to the telephone at the other side of the bed and called Sheriff Fergusson. Mr. Fergusson had told her not to touch anything, not to speak to anyone, and not to let anyone into the room.

"Quite right, Maria," Dagobert said, edging past her. "Quite right. No one must come into this room until we have made a thorough examination. Absolutely no one."

"But, sir . . ."

"And I'm afraid you're included in that, Jane," he turned sternly to me.

"But Mr. Fergusson said *no one*," Maria protested, skirting round Dagobert in an attempt to intercept his advance. While she was thus occupied I slipped in behind her.

"Now we've let *her* in," Dagobert complained. "Perhaps you'd better stay at the window, Maria, and stop the others. . . . But it, Jane," he added briefly.

The tone implied that this was man's work. In normal circumstances I should have resented it, but at the moment I was inclined to join Maria meekly at the window and leave Dagobert to his own devices. Then I saw that he was as frightened as I was myself. Dagobert is not nearly as tough as he thinks he is. Give him a hypothetical scene of crime over a glass of brandy after dinner and no one is more resolute. On the other hand, I've seen him very close to fainting when he once had to shoot a cat which had been run over and half killed by a motor-car.

"If Maria can take it, we can," I reminded him.

I took a step forward into the room, and he immediately pushed past me.

"We can be gaoled for this," he said.

The thought seemed to reassure and steady him. I crept after him, walking instinctively on tiptoes. Maria had drawn only the one pair of curtains, and the big room was still full of shadows. The early morning sunlight cut a diagonal path along the rich brown carpet and slanted across the sycamore end of the wide double bed.

I looked everywhere except directly at that bed, though I think I was always conscious of the bare arm dangling from the pillow. It seemed to be superimposed over the series of photographic impressions I had of the low, kidney-shaped dressing-table, with its battery of cut-glass jars, bottles of lotions, pots of face-creams, gigantic powder-puffs; of the bookcase filled with mystery stories; of the Marie Laurencin pictures on the pale-primrose walls.

That dangling bare arm which, with the softly rippling voice heard only over the telephone, was still all I directly knew of the legendary Miranda! I had pictured her a hundred times, but in spite of Dagobert's snapshots of her, my image of the real Miranda was as elusive as she herself had been yesterday. Now, defenceless, she awaited inspection, no longer elusive. I felt a mounting reluctance to look squarely at her, to violate the privacy she ought to have earned in death.

This was absurd; not delicacy, but plain funk. The legendary Miranda had indeed passed into legend. What lay huddled on the bed was lifeless clay, possibly evidence in a crime, a problem

which could be solved intellectually.

I drew a deep breath and looked at her. I discovered at once that my emotional conflict had been unnecessary. She was simply a total stranger who at first glimpse appeared to be asleep.

Then I saw that her eyes were open, and for a second that did give me a shock. A shaft of sunlight had crept up her face, glinted suddenly into those eyes, and they had not even blinked. They were grey-green in this light, widely spaced, as frank as her sister Peggy's.

I tried to concentrate on those details which might perhaps have some bearing on her murder—the fact, for instance, that she had not removed her make-up, that her extremely fair hair curling behind her head looked as though it were dressed to receive company rather than in preparation for sleep, the lips half parted as though in mild surprise or protest, and not, I thought, in terror. I tried to note these possibly useful details. But I found myself simply looking at Miranda herself.

What astonished me most was her smallness. Somehow I had imagined Miranda Ross to be a person of heroic figure. I suppose I had expected her to dominate physically as she did in every other way. Actually she was tiny. There was an exquisite Dresden-doll-like quality about her which I hadn't anticipated. I knew she must be in her middle thirties, but she looked as young as Peggy. With a little exercise of the imagination you could see she was Peggy's sister. Peggy's hair was straight and wiry, Miranda's soft and waving; but it grew in the same way off the forehead and was the same colour. Their features were structurally the same, but Miranda's nose was slim and delicate, while Peggy's was inclined to tilt. Peggy's mouth was broad and aggressive, Miranda's was refined and subtle, made for smiling instead of loud guffaws. A sculptor might have used the same model for them both and made of Peggy a hooligan and of Miranda a nymph. Miranda was, I found myself thinking, everything Peggy must have longed to be, striven to imitate, and never achieved.

"She looks like an angel," I murmured, unconsciously adding another to the list of words—saint, ideal wife—which I had heard Miranda called.

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"She looks like an angel," I murmured, unconsciously adding another to the list of words—saint, ideal wife—which I had heard Miranda called.

Dagobert was not looking at Miranda. He had glanced briefly at the knife-handle with a kind of brusque air of efficiency which masked, I knew, his physical distaste for scenes of violence. He was roaming the room, looking very sleuth-like and impressive, and I privately doubted if he were getting anywhere.

He turned to Maria, who was watching us helplessly from the open french window.

"There are two cups of black coffee on this tray," he pointed out. "Who was the second one for?"

"Mr. Julian," Maria said. "I'd forgotten he was spending the night in El Paso."

"I see. . . ." Dagobert got down on his hands and knees as though to examine invisible footmarks on the heavy pile carpet. "What time did you go to bed last night, Maria?" he added, apparently making conversation.

"About ten, like I always do."

"Did you go right to sleep?"

"Sure."

Dagobert said nothing for a moment. He had crawled almost under the foot of the double bed. I saw him pick up something which looked like a tiny oblong of brown paper.

"And you didn't wake up again until early this morning," he added finally. He slipped the minute brown object into his pocket.

"That's right." Maria nodded.

He rose and turned towards her. "Then what do you mean," he said, "you'd *forgotten* Mr. Ross was spending the night in El Paso? How did you know he was going to spend the night in El Paso?"

Maria looked blank, but her fingers played nervously with the starched edges of her apron. "I—I didn't," she stammered. "When I brought in the coffee and he wasn't here—I guessed he must of."

Dagobert shook his head gently. "Who told you he was going to stay the night, Maria?" he asked.

To my astonishment I saw that the girl was on the verge of tears.

"Nobody told me."

"Did Mr. Ross himself tell you?"

"No!"

Dagobert sighed. "You know that would have been your best answer, Maria," he said helpfully. "Because with the possible exception of Mr. Julian Ross himself, no one at Palo Alto knew, before a quarter to twelve when he telephoned, that he was spending the night in El Paso. So somebody told you after a quarter to twelve—when you were asleep. Or else somebody told you before a quarter to twelve—when nobody knew it. Make a note of this, Jane. I don't know what Pa Fergusson would do without me."

Dagobert looked pleased with himself. I didn't like to spoil his complacency, so I refrained from pointing out that Pa Fergusson himself had come through the garden and was standing behind him in the french windows beside Maria.

Pa Fergusson was looking as though he would love to try doing without Dagobert. Sheriff Fergusson was looking, in fact, remarkably unlike the benevolent proprietor of Pa's Place with whom we had hit it off so well yesterday. He watched Dagobert with dislike, mechanically fingering an immense Colt automatic which hung at his belt.

"The next thing is finger-prints," Dagobert went on blissfully. "The knife we'd better leave for the moment."

"Yes." I smiled uneasily in the direction of the Deputy-Sheriff. "I think we'd better leave that for the moment."

Dagobert was leaning over the bedside table, sniffing at a tumbler full of what looked like port. "Port," he confirmed. "California, Vintage 1948. . . . The glass is covered with finger-prints, probably hers. . . . Hello! The book she was reading was one of yours, Jane."

"I was afraid of that," I nodded, still eyeing Pa Fergusson, who did not return my shy smile.

Dagobert had removed a handkerchief and was about to pick up a small gold wristwatch which lay beside the tumbler. "I say, this thing's stopped at half-past one. The crystal is smashed."

"Hey!" shouted Pa Fergusson.

Dagobert glanced round. "Hello," he said. "This is a surprise."

"Is it?" Fergusson grunted. "I ain't so very surprised." He

turned to Maria. "How long these two been here?"

"About ten minutes."

"She tried to keep us out," Dagobert said. "But I explained we were helping you. Now it strikes me that we ought to analyse the contents of this glass. And then there are finger-prints. Are you any good at finger-prints?"

"Yeah," Fergusson nodded. "Now get outta here."

He came into the room, followed by young Dr. Carter who had joined him, having paused outside to fetch in a camera, medical kit, and finger-printing equipment from the car. Dagobert was delighted with these indications of scientific crime detection.

"I've always wanted to see someone take finger-prints," he said enthusiastically. "Shall we start with the knife?"

Pa Fergusson's hand left the holster of his automatic, reluctantly, I thought. He started to say something, but instead moved his toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Okay, Doc," he murmured, ignoring Dagobert, who crowded round expectantly.

The two men knelt beside the bed, and without touching the body examined the knife handle. Fergusson produced a magnifying glass. Carter rose.

"Shall we take the photographs first and then get the finger-prints?" he suggested.

"Yeah," Fergusson said, also rising. "Only," he continued, looking speculatively at the handkerchief in Dagobert's hand, "only there ain't no finger-prints. They've been rubbed off."

CHAPTER VIII

DAGOBERT fingered the handkerchief in his hand as though he didn't know where it had come from and didn't quite know what to do with it. He began to stuff it into his breast pocket, changed his mind, and mopped his forehead with it instead.

"I see what you mean," he said to the Deputy-Sheriff. "Criminal returning to scene of crime. Removing the tell-tale finger-prints from lethal weapon, etc., etc. Only I didn't. Now my theory is that the murderer wore gloves. If you don't arrest me, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll help you solve this murder. And another thing. How do we know it wasn't suicide?"

Fergusson squinted through the lens of the camera Dr. Carter had set up beside the bed. "Shut up," he said.

"I thought you like to hear me rippin' away," Dagobert said.

"You'll rip when I get ready for you to rip," Fergusson muttered. "How long do you reckon she's been dead, Doc?"

"Several hours, anyway," the doctor said. "I can give you a better idea after the post-mortem."

Fergusson adjusted the camera. "What time did you go to bed last night?" he asked Dagobert.

"Ten o'clock precisely," Dagobert replied. "As a matter of fact, we went to bed at least two hours before you did."

I could see Pa Fergusson didn't want to be drawn, but curiosity was too much for him. "How do you know when I went to bed?" he asked.

"Because I telephoned your place at a quarter to twelve, and there was no answer."

The camera was now set, but Fergusson hesitated before clicking the shutter. "Thought you said you went to bed at ten," he snapped irritably.

"Yes," Dagobert explained simply, "but we got up again."

"Do you want us in this photograph?" I interrupted, "or shall we go?"

"Can we go?" Dagobert corrected sententiously. "That's a real point. Dare he let us go?"

"Look, mister, and you too, lady." There was a note of appeal in Pa Fergusson's voice. "Would you do me a favour? Would you please beat it? Would you kindly get the hell outta here just go and have yourselves some breakfast. . . . Say, what time is breakfast, Maria?"

"About eight."

"I'll tell you what," Fergusson said. "I'll have breakfast with you—the lot of you, I mean. And then we can all jaw about it together. Only"—and his voice rose again to that querulous note I had previously heard him use only in addressing his daughter-in-law Yolanda—"only for crying out loud, can you keep your gosh-darned mouth shut until then?"

Dagobert nodded amiably. "Jolly good show, Sheriff. We'll get the psychological reactions of the others on first hearing the news."

"Thanks," Fergusson grunted briefly. "Jeeze! Haven't you gone?"

"Just off, Sheriff," Dagobert said airily.

"You've made a hit with the Deputy-Sheriff," I commented when we were in the corridor outside.

"Look, lady," Dagobert said. "I am a visiting Englishman, and therefore a professional silly ass. I'll get along twice as well with Pa if I keep it that way. Remind me to say right-ho occasionally."

"You'll get along with him all right unless you talk yourself into gaol."

"Pa belongs to the school which believes that only harmless fools talk all the time."

"He may have something at that," I remarked. "What was the down thing you found under the bed?"

"A clue. I'm suppressing it."

"What is it?"

"Shush!" he warned. "We don't want to wake any of the cops."

"Why are you suppressing it?"

"There are too many clues already," he said. "Let's go and annoy the kitchen staff."

As we left Miranda's room the first door on the right led into a guest-room, a window of which overlooked the Rosses' private walled-garden. This room, we learned over a cup of coffee in the kitchen, was occupied by Dwight Karnak. It communicated by way of a bathroom with the room occupied by Sue Karnak. The Karnaks, it seemed, were always given separate rooms when they visited Palo Alto. We too, I remembered, had been offered separate rooms.

Opposite Dwight's room was Peggy's, and next to Peggy's room Mr. Voigt slept off his hang-overs. Hal and Bill McFarlan each had a room similar to our own facing the main patio, and young Winthrop slept somewhere in the back of the house with Maria.

After coffee we wandered towards the dining-room. The refectory table was set for breakfast, but no one had yet appeared.

"What clues?" I said to Dagobert, going back half an hour in the conversation. "Name one. Besides the one in your pocket you're so mysterious about."

"Well, there's Winthrop's—or is it Hal's?—knife with apparently no finger-prints on it," he reminded me, "and the untouched glass of port which is covered with finger-prints. There's the curtain leading into the private garden which wasn't properly drawn, suggesting a nocturnal intruder. There's the wristwatch with the smashed crystal conveniently stopped at one-thirty. There's Maria *forgetting* that Julian was spending the night in El Paso when she didn't know he *was* spending the night in El Paso. There's Hal warning us that Miranda expected murder. And most interesting of all, there is young Winthrop intimating that Miranda was not the universally beloved angel that everyone else agrees she was. Is that enough to go on with?"

I said that it was.

"If not," he said, glancing towards the door, "you can start figuring that one out."

That one was Bill McFarlan, or more precisely the most striking thing about Bill McFarlan—the livid circle of black which surrounded his left eye. He looked as though he'd been hit by a

bulldozer. He paused in the door, pretended not to see us, and began to withdraw.

"Hello," Dagobert said. "Breakfast will be ready any moment!"

"Oh!" Bill grunted. The word "breakfast" seemed offensive to him. "I'm not hungry. I'm—to tell the truth, I'm just off. If you don't mind, you might say good-bye and thanks to M-M-Mrs. Ross for me."

"With pleasure," Dagobert said with that blandness many months of married life had taught me to distrust. "And to Mr. Ross too, of course."

Bill coloured slightly. "Yes, sure. Of course," he agreed hastily, "when he comes back from El P-Paso. Say I was sorry to miss him."

"But didn't he come back last night?" Dagobert asked innocently, sipping orange juice from one of the glasses on the table.

"Oh, did he? I understood he . . . Yes, that's right. He was driving back after dinner, wasn't he? I missed him. I went to bed pretty early. Well, I'll be s-seeing you."

While Dagobert and I were thinking of some way to detain him, Pa Fergusson came in. He was still wearing his straw sombrero and chewing the same toothpick. He glanced at Dagobert and me briefly and without enthusiasm.

"You're McFarlan from over at the Research Station, aren't you?" he said to Bill. "I'm Deputy-Sheriff Fergusson."

Bill said hello perfunctorily, and began to hold out his hand. Pa ignored the gesture. "Sit down, please," he said. "We're going to have breakfast."

"But I don't want any breakfast," Bill explained, doubtfully eyeing the Deputy-Sheriff's badge. "I'm just . . ."

"Sit down, son," Pa interrupted gently. "Mrs. Ross wouldn't want you to leave without any breakfast."

"Mrs. Ross w-w-won't——" Bill began a little bitterly.

"Yeah, we know," Pa again interrupted. "Mrs. Ross is dead." He took off his hat as he said it, fingering the brim awkwardly. "How did you know, son?" he murmured.

"I didn't know." Bill gripped the edge of the refectory table to steady himself. "I—I don't believe it."

Pa replaced his hat, having paid his tribute to the memory of the dead. "You can't stick a jack-knife up to the hilt in a person without killing them," he argued reasonably.

Bill was as white as a sheet. He lowered rather than raised his voice, but the hysteria was audible nevertheless. "I didn't d-d-do it! I l-l-l——"

"Who said you did, son?" Pa interposed mildly.

Dagobert put down his empty orange-juice glass and reached for another. "McFarlan was about to say that he loved her," he suggested.

"Nonsense!" I put in tartly, feeling the emotional relationships at Palo Alto were my province, not Dagobert's. "Bill is in love with Peggy—aren't you, Bill?"

"No," Bill said, collapsing on to a chair.

"Where'd you get that black eye?" Pa inquired.

"This?" I think Bill had forgotten it. "I b-bumped into something last night."

"Yeah, I see," Pa nodded. "But who?"

"Who? Nobody. A branch of a tree—out by the corral."

"It would make our task much easier," Dagobert said, "if you would confine yourself strictly to the truth. Did Larry Fergusson sock you when he brought Peggy home at half-past eleven last night?"

Bill appealed to Pa. "Has this man any right to question me?"

"No," Pa said. "Did Larry sock you?"

"Nobody socked me," Bill said doggedly. "W-why should anyone sock me?"

"Oddly enough, that's just the little point the Sheriff and I were working round to," Dagobert said. "You tell us why."

"D-do you mind if I go?" Bill rose violently.

"Take it easy, son," Pa advised. "I'd be grateful if you'd hang around for awhile. You, too," he added more firmly, glaring at us.

"Try to get rid of us," Dagobert said.

A clock in the drawing-room struck eight, and a moment afterwards the Karnaks appeared. Dwight had that newly shaved, massaged look which went with the prosperous business man

rather than the musician. Sue, with her fair hair loose around her shoulders and only her lips made-up, looked prettier than I remembered her. I saw Dagobert rise with, I thought, unnecessary gallantry and offer her his chair. The Karnaks were both dressed for riding, Sue in perfectly tailored jodhpurs, and a dull-green tweed jacket of the sort nowadays found in England with the label: "For Export Only." I remembered that Miranda had arranged a riding excursion.

They glanced questioningly at Pa Fergusson, who again removed his hat. Dagobert introduced them. They probably assumed that Pa was the guide for to-day's outing and, being familiar with Western manners, were not particularly surprised to find him having breakfast with the "company."

"Where's everybody?" Dwight rubbed his hands together heartily. "I mean the family. Late for breakfast? This will never do. I could eat a horse. Hey, Maria! Why wait?"

"We tapped at Miranda and Julian's door," Sue explained, "but it was locked. They never mind if we start without them."

Pa Fergusson grunted. He, of course, had locked the door.

"How's the headache?" Dagobert asked Sue as he sat down beside her.

"Quite gone, thanks!" She smiled up at him. "They never last more than twenty-four hours, and Miranda gave me something which worked wonders."

Pa glanced up. "When was this?"

Sue, a little surprised at Pa's interest in her health, looked across the table at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Dagobert winked broadly at Pa. "Mr. Fergusson gets headaches too," he explained to Sue. "In fact, boy, what headaches he gets! He means, what time did you take this wonder-working headache medicine?"

"I mean . . ." Pa began, suddenly on his dignity. He thought again and glowered at Dagobert. "Okay," he muttered.

"A character," Dagobert said to Sue in a confidential whisper audible to everyone. "Better humour him."

"Oh!" Sue nodded, instinctively edging a little nearer Dagobert. Then with a more generalised smile she added: "It was

about eleven, I think. I dozed off quite soon afterwards—I don't even remember Miranda leaving me—and this morning I feel as fit as a flea. I can let you have the rest of the bottle, Mr. Fergusson, if you like."

"Thanks," Pa nodded absently. He was watching Dwight, who had waved aside the breakfast foods and was helping himself liberally from a handsome platter of ham and eggs. "What about you?" he said.

"Me?" Dwight stared at him. "I'm fine, thanks. Never had a headache in my life. Have some ham? When do we start on this excursion?"

Pa took the extended platter. "When did you go to bed?"

Dwight glanced round the table, conscious that people were waiting for his reply. "Does it matter?" he said.

"It might," Pa admitted.

"Say, what is this?" Dwight looked a little pugnacious suddenly. "A cross-examination?"

Dagobert kicked him gently under the table. "That's right," he winked. "Can't you see the Sheriff's badge?"

"Oh," Dwight grunted, dubiously placated. "Sure. Let's see, I went to bed rather late." And he returned to his ham and eggs.

"How late?" Dagobert poured Sue a cup of coffee and continued to watch Dwight. "Better tell us exactly what you did from after dinner on to when you went to bed."

Sue looked bored. She resented the fact that Dwight was now the centre of attention. She preferred to tell Dagobert about her headache. "I think this is silly," she pouted.

Bill McFarlan, who had not uttered a word since the Karnaks' entrance, suddenly dropped his spoon with a clatter into the untouched plate of cornflakes in front of him. He looked up wildly.

"Don't you realise," he rasped out, "that M-M-Miranda has been murdered!"

I saw Dwight's strong fingers relax, then tighten violently on his knife and fork. His smooth face had gone ashen under its morning massage. He stared down the table towards McFarlan in a stupor of unbelief.

Sue gasped, and her pretty face pinkened as she gaped at Bill,

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Dagobert kicked him gently under the table. "That's right," he winked. "Can't you see the Sheriff's badge?"

"Oh," Dwight grunted, dubiously placated. "Sure. Let's see, I went to bed rather late." And he returned to his ham and eggs.

"How late?" Dagobert poured Sue a cup of coffee and continued to watch Dwight. "Better tell us exactly what you did from after dinner on to when you went to bed."

Sue looked bored. She resented the fact that Dwight was now the centre of attention. She preferred to tell Dagobert about her headache. "I think this is silly," she pouted.

Bill McFarlan, who had not uttered a word since the Karnaks' entrance, suddenly dropped his spoon with a clatter into the untouched plate of cornflakes in front of him. He looked up wildly.

"Don't you realise," he rasped out, "that M-M-Miranda has been murdered!"

I saw Dwight's strong fingers relax, then tighten violently on his knife and fork. His smooth face had gone ashen under its morning massage. He stared down the table towards McFarlan in a stupor of unbelief.

Sue gasped, and her pretty face pinkened as she gaped at Bill,

Pa chuckled soundlessly. "There's a guy for you," he said. "How long did this walk of yours take?"

"I must have stayed out over an hour," Dwight estimated. "I got an idea for a song, and didn't realise how late it was. I suppose it was nearly midnight when I got back to the house."

"Did you see anybody around?"

Dwight hesitated. "Well, as a matter of fact, I did."

"Who?"

"That's the funny part of it," Dwight said doubtfully. "I don't know. Two people sneaking along the edge of the patio. I had the impression they didn't want to be seen."

"We didn't," I said. "We were in pyjamas."

"Oh!" Dwight grunted. He looked at Dagobert and me speculatively, then returned with an effort to his narrative. "I went through the house back to my room. I looked in again on Sue, but she was fast asleep—with her mouth open."

"I don't think that is an essential part of the evidence, my dear," Sue suggested tartly.

"Then," Dwight went on, "I began to get undressed. But I—I suddenly changed my mind."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. I just did."

It was the first point in his story at which Dwight seemed to show any hesitation. Pa Fergusson was quite as quick to observe it as we were.

"Who did you see?" he demanded abruptly. "Who did you see that made you change your mind?"

"See? Nobody." But again he spoke hesitantly. "Nobody at all."

Pa half rose and stretched across the refectory table for the silver coffee-pot. He spoke evenly, but a kind of anger glowed in his mild blue eyes.

"I am investigating a murder, Mr. Karnak," he said, "and I want to warn everybody right now that if they lie to me there's going to be trouble. The window in your room overlooks the Rosses' private garden." He eased his bulk back gently into his chair. "Now who did you see?" he rapped out.

"Nobody, I tell you. I just changed my mind. I wasn't sleepy,

so I went to the drawing-room again and played the piano."

"Music is very soothing in these cases," Dagobert said.

"If you want to know," Dwight said sharply, "I worked out the song I'd thought about during my walk! I was at the piano until nearly three o'clock, when I finally turned in."

"Fine alibi," Dagobert said admiringly. "Especially if anyone heard you." He added thoughtfully, "Except it's one of those mechanical pianos which play themselves. . . ."

"What the hell are you insinuating?"

"You work it out," Dagobert suggested.

Dwight had leapt violently to his feet. For a moment I thought there was going to be bloodshed. I glanced helplessly at Pa Fergusson, but to my surprise Pa seemed to be rather enjoying the prospect. I suddenly had the unlikely impression he was secretly egging Dagobert on!

"Listen to me, you," Dwight threatened. I saw—and hoped Dagobert saw—that he had doubled up a colossal right fist.

"I'm all ears," Dagobert drawled. "Who *did* you see shortly after midnight in Miranda's private garden?"

"Damn you!" Dwight snarled, swinging wildly.

Dagobert ducked. Dwight missed him, and Dagobert only banged his head against the table, breaking a saucer.

Pa held the coffee-pot over my empty cup. "Let me help you to a little coffee, ma'am," he said. I glanced into his blue eyes. They were definitely twinkling.

Dagobert had emerged from the shelter of the table, looking pleased with himself. He edged nearer to Sue for protection. "Don't apologise," he said to her. "Lots of men are bad-tempered at breakfast. . . . Does your husband make a regular habit of hissing people? Or only just me . . . and poor old Bill McFarlan?"

I had almost forgotten Bill. But Pa hadn't.

"Were you going to say something, son?" he prompted gently.

The colour went from Bill's face, then rushed back again.

"All right," he blurted out. "Karnak saw *me* in that g-garden. W-we had a fight."

CHAPTER IX

"WHAT were you doing there in that garden at midnight, son?" Pa asked Bill.

"Nothing. I—n-nothing."

"The Romeo routine," Sue suggested nastily, but I imagine accurately. She fixed her flushed husband with a cool gaze of appraisal. "Sit down, my little Knight-errant, my brave Protector of Woman's Innocence. Sit down, you poor sap! You haven't finished breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," Dwight said with dignity. But he sat down.

Mr. Voigt appeared abruptly in the door, like a gaunt phantom summoned unwillingly from another more restful world. He was wearing bedroom slippers, a white bathrobe made of towelling, and a wet face-cloth wrapped around his head. He took a look at the table and ourselves and said: "Gawdalmighty!"

Then he retreated towards the kitchen shouting: "Maria! Alajandrina! What's-your-name! Bring me my breakfast! Pronto—or whatever you call it."

He reappeared a second later, and slumped down into an empty chair beside me without addressing a word to anyone. He clutched his water glass, lifted it uncertainly to his lips, and drained it at a gulp.

"A restful night?" I inquired.

He stared at me, focused with an effort, and recognised me.

"Didn't sleep a wink," he grunted. "Good morning, Mrs. Brown. Have some breakfast. Is that you, Sue? How's the headache? Mine's terrible." He nudged me feebly, and knitted his bushy black eyebrows towards Pa, who sat on the other side of me. "What's *he* doing here?" he muttered.

I was saved from having to think of a suitable reply by Peggy's entrance. Dressed in the inevitable blue jeans, she was looking fresh and wholesome, and as like her sister Miranda as a vigorous garden flower does to its rare hothouse relative.

"Sorry to be so late, everybody," she said. "But I overslept. I had a heavy date last night—jeeze, was it heavy! Hey, Maria!"

"Don't shout!" Mr. Voigt shuddered.

A maid—not Maria—entered at that moment carrying his breakfast. This was a glass of bromo-seltzer and two aspirins. Peggy ordered oatmeal porridge, ham and eggs, pancakes and sausages. Meanwhile she staved off starvation with a huge glass of milk. She noticed Pa Fergusson. I thought she started, but if so, she recovered her equanimity immediately.

"Hello, you old son-of-a-coyote," she greeted him. "What's up?"

"Don't shout," old Voigt again pleaded.

I was on his side. Peggy did seem unnecessarily noisy this morning. Observing her more closely, I thought that she was a little pink around the eyes. If you could picture her indulging any such feminine weakness, you might have thought she had been crying.

"Hello, Peggy," Pa said non-committally.

"What's up?" she repeated in clear, ringing tones. "Don't tell me somebody's been bumped off!"

Mr. Voigt rose, clutching his Bromo-seltzer. "I'm going to have my breakfast outside," he announced wearily.

"That's right," Pa said, watching Peggy as he spoke. "Somebody's been bumped off."

Peggy paused with her mouth full of porridge. "How do you mean?"

"Bumped off, like you said," Pa explained. "Killed. . . . Murdered, I guess."

Peggy tried to swallow. She was pale suddenly. "Not—not Julian," she managed to gasp.

"No, not Julian," Pa said. "Julian spent the night in El Paso and hasn't come home yet. Your sister, Miranda. . . . I'm sure sorry."

From behind the table came the crash of a glass as the Bromo-seltzer slipped from Mr. Voigt's hand on to the stone floor. We all stared round.

"I don't believe it," Voigt said. "He wouldn't have the guts."

"Who wouldn't have the guts, Mr. Voigt?" Pa asked.

"Say, are you kidding, Fergusson?" Mr. Voigt ventured back towards the table a step or two. "Because it's too early in the morning."

"Miranda Ross," said Pa coldly, and in the stilted manner of one who has rehearsed the speech, "was found in bed at six o'clock this morning by the maid Maria Hernandez. She was dead. Death was caused by stabbing between the second and third ribs above the right—the right chest. She was stabbed by a black-handled jack-knife which belonged to the child Winthrop. All we know at present is that she was murdered some time between eleven, when she left Mrs. Karnak's room, and six o'clock this morning, when Maria found her. Can anybody narrow that down?"

No one said anything.

"I heard her voice on the telephone at a quarter to twelve," Dagobert contributed.

"Anybody see her after that?" Pa looked deliberately from Dwight, who said nothing, to Bill McFarlan, who appeared not to hear the question.

"Anybody else?" he repeated, like an auctioneer soliciting a higher bid.

There was still no answer, but I had the feeling that several people in the room were doing a lot of quick thinking.

Peggy, I believe, was beyond thought. She was staring at her porridge plate as though she saw there all the world as she had known it vanish. Occasionally hot waves of colour would come into her face, as though from unbidden, unwelcome surges of memory. Voigt stood like a statue, his early-morning trembles frozen into immobility.

"We're all here," Fergusson reminded us, "so somebody must of seen her after a quarter to twelve."

"Why?" asked Voigt, whose powers of deduction were not at their maximum at this hour.

"The murderer, for instance, must of seen her," Pa said.

"Yes, but the murderer may not be here," Sue pointed out. "And besides," she added, obscurely remembering the parlour

game of her youth, "even if he is, he doesn't have to answer questions."

"You said it, lady," Pa nodded dryly. "So the rest of you would seem a lot more innocent if you'd try to help."

"We're not all here," Voigt said. "Hal's not here."

Peggy came out of her reverie. She said reluctantly: "I guess it would come out eventually, anyway. . . . I saw Miranda last night after a quarter to twelve. I went into her room at about ten minutes past twelve to say good night."

I happened to be watching old man Voigt as Peggy spoke. He was making faces at her and shaking his head.

"Was it a peaceful session?" Dagobert asked casually.

Peggy regarded him frigidly. "What's it to you?" she snapped.

A smile flickered across Pa's rotund face. Some day somebody was going to hit Dagobert, and Pa was looking forward to the occasion.

"Perhaps," I put in, "Mr. Voigt could answer Dagobert's question. His room isn't far away, and he may have overheard the conversation."

"Did you?" Pa asked.

"Slept like a log from ten last night until eight this morning," Voigt said.

"You told Mrs. Brown you didn't sleep a wink," Pa reminded him.

"Did I?" the old man grunted. "Well, I lied. Besides, you can't hear a word in Miranda's room from my room. Go ahead and find your murderer, Fergusson, and stop asking me a lot of damn silly questions."

He stalked grandly towards the door. The dignity of his exit was marred by his almost tripping over young Winthrop, who was standing there watching us with dark, solemn eyes.

"Shouldn't you be going to school, young fellow?" Voigt mumbled.

The child shook his head. "Nope. I ain't going to school. On account Mom's got murdered," he added, not without satisfaction.

"That's no way to talk, sonny," Pa said, slightly scandalised. "You run along now like a good boy."

"Won't," said Winthrop firmly.

Voigt looked helplessly from the child to Peggy, who had risen uncertainly. It was a situation which Miranda could probably have handled.

"Won't, won't, won't!" the child yelled, feeling that the best defence was attack.

No one seemed to know quite what to do with him. Peggy tried soft words and hypocritical allusions to what fun it was at school, but Winthrop ignored them for what they were. I could see Dagobert's fingers itching to eject him with physical violence. Pa turned out to be the only man of action. Winthrop screamed as the Sheriff grasped him gently by the shoulders. He squirmed free and kicked Pa in the shins. Then before Pa could retaliate, he played his trump card.

"I know who murdered Mom!" he gasped.

Pa halted and the rest of us sat up and took notice. If Winthrop's desire was to be the centre of attraction, he had certainly attained it.

"Is that so?" Pa drawled.

"Yeah, only I ain't going to tell!" said Winthrop.

He glanced at us all with what looked to me like a sneer. He was quite aware that he had caused a sensation, and I think he despised us for his easy triumph. He turned suddenly and ran from the room, singing as he went: "I know who done it. I know who done it."

There was a moment's silence after he went. At least we'd got rid of him. Peggy was the first to speak. The sceptical smile on her face did not extend to her grey eyes.

"He's lying, of course," she said. "He'll always tell a lie to attract attention."

Pa had already tinkled the little silver bell on the breakfast-table. A maid appeared immediately.

"Tell Maria to come here," Pa said.

Maria materialised with equal speed. Evidently the servants were keeping close to the dining-room this morning. Maria looked

scared as Pa asked her if Winthrop had left his bed last night. She shook her head, and her reply suggested that she too had heard Winthrop's outburst.

"He's always saying things like that," she said. "He's a plenty had boy."

Pa nodded and dismissed her. "Okay, the kid's lying," he said, addressing the remark to us all generally. "Can any of you get any sense out of him?"

"No," Voigt said. "Miranda could. Hal sometimes can. If you want to hang somebody on the evidence of an imaginative child, go ahead." This time he got through the door. We heard him shambling along the cobblestones in the patio outside.

"Do you mind if I go too?" Peggy said, rising. "I'd better get Winthrop off to school . . . and besides, there are one or two things I want to get used to."

"Sure. I understand," Pa said with gruff sympathy. "You can all go, so long as you don't go too far and I know where to find you."

He had followed Peggy to the door, reaching into the pocket of his patched blue jeans. When he withdrew his hand it held a small gold wristwatch. "Is this yours, Miss Peggy?" he asked formally.

She glanced at it, hesitated for a split second, and then reached out her hand. "Yes," she said. "I lost it a couple of days ago. Where did you find it?"

Pa looked at Dagobert. "Just around," he shrugged vaguely.

Dagobert removed his pocket handkerchief and blew his nose. The watch was the one that had stood beside the tumbler of untouched port on Miranda's bedside table. It was the watch with the smashed crystal and the hands which had stopped at half-past one.

CHAPTER X

"I WONDER," Dagobert said to me when we had retired to the library, "if it will turn out that Miranda was stabbed at half-past one."

I was wondering the same thing—and rather hoping it wouldn't.

"If Voigt heard raised voices or anything which indicated a sisterly row," I said, "it was presumably not at half-past one, but at ten-past twelve, when Peggy admits she dropped in to say good night to Miranda."

"She could have gone back later."

"I wish we had driven on into Mexico," I said miserably. "I don't like your friends. . . . What did you think of their reaction to the news?"

Dagobert laid aside the book in which he had been browsing—if one can be said to browse in a volume entitled *Nuclear Physics*—and considered the question.

"There has been only one totally honest reaction to Miranda's death," he said finally. "And that was young Winthrop's."

I nodded, remembering with a slight shudder those awful words: "I'm glad Mom's dead." I found myself wondering in how many other minds in Palo Alto similar words might be echoing, unspoken.

"I don't know anything about children," I said slowly, "but he *couldn't* know, could he? I mean, he was lying, as Peggy said."

"I suppose so. . . . Yes, of course . . ." he added, returning to *Nuclear Physics*. "He *was* right last night at dinner when he said Sue was having a baby."

I let him read for a moment. "But everybody adored Miranda." I repeated mechanically an article of faith I was beginning to question.

"Everyone *admired* her," he corrected me. "Miranda was the woman on the pedestal. The trouble with pedestals is you've got to stay there. You can't relax."

"Do you think Miranda relaxed?"

"She never used to," Dagobert said. "No midnight visitors in the old AFHQ days."

"Last night you were sure her conversation with Julian was interrupted by a visitor," I reminded him. My heart skipped a beat as I said it, for I remembered that others could have come to the same conclusion. Miranda's husband, for instance! "Julian may have thought so too!" I exclaimed. "And if so——"

Dagobert shook his head. "I doubt if Julian could have got back from El Paso by one-thirty. He *might*, of course. And of course she may not have been murdered at one-thirty. Let's not do any serious brainwork until the police have established a few firm facts to go on. . . . What do you suppose Planck's Constant is?" He was deep in *Nuclear Physics* again. "Ah, of course, 6.56 times 10 to the minus 27th. . . . How forgetful of me!"

I stubbed out a cigarette and glanced over his shoulder. The page which seemed to absorb him was a nightmare of mathematical formulæ. A paragraph had been underscored, something about "Heisenburg's Principle of Indeterminacy." Beside it someone had scribbled the words: "Copy this out."

"Miranda's writing," Dagobert told me.

"I didn't know she was interested in nuclear physics."

"Not nuclear physics," he suggested. "Nuclear physicists."

"Are you a nuclear physicist?" I asked, glancing up at Bill McFarlan, who stood in the library door. Bill seemed to have a habit of standing in doors.

He flushed slightly and nearly achieved a smile. "I suppose I am," he said modestly. "Anyway, I thought I was until—well, I've more or less accepted a new job—with Lever and Gimbler. You know, the big soap people in Chicago." He sounded as though he were trying to pronounce the words with pride, but only half succeeding.

"Never heard of them," Dagobert said. "Why don't you come in and sit down?"

"Do you m-mind if I do?" Bill accepted the invitation gratefully. "They're part of N.C.A., who more or less control the world's chemical industries. I'd be a damn fool to turn down

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"Because this morning when Marie brought in the coffee the curtains were not quite drawn. In other words, someone opened them at least an inch or two after two minutes past twelve last night. You didn't come back *again*, by any chance?"

"No!" Bill shook his head. "I went to bed."

"Dwight Karnak?"

Bill bit his lip. But he shook his head again, more slowly this time. "Karnak went into the drawing-room and played the piano as he said," he admitted reluctantly. "I couldn't get to sleep for awhile and I heard him."

Dagobert recovered Professor Hecht's volume on *Nuclear Physics* from the floor. "When you first came in, Jane and I were having an academic argument," he remarked, replacing the volume on the bookshelf. "Maybe you'd give us your opinion. The discussion was a man's reactions upon discovering that the woman he idolised had slipped from her pedestal and was no better than anybody else. Would he hate her, or only hate himself for having been such a fool? Could his disillusion be so bitter that it might temporarily rob him of his sanity?"

I couldn't see Bill's face as Dagobert spoke. He had turned towards the fire-place.

"Do you mean," he said slowly, "could I have murdered Miranda had I thought she wasn't everything I b-believed her to be?"

"That's roughly the idea."

Bill didn't answer for a moment. I saw his shoulders slump. "I don't know," he whispered finally. "But I didn't kill her."

"You are not," Dagobert reminded him, "the only member of the household who worshipped Miranda. Others may have wearied of burning incense before the altar."

CHAPTER XI

We all agreed that Bill ought to find the Sheriff and tell him exactly what he'd told us. Bill said he'd think it over, and wandered out across the patio. He had plenty to think over.

"I wish somebody would offer you fifteen thousand a year," I said reflectively. "You must be as clever as Bill McFarlan."

"What I need," Dagobert sighed, "is a woman of strong, forceful character behind me—a woman like Miranda."

"I couldn't agree with you more. . . . Peggy didn't lose that wristwatch a couple of days ago as she told Pa," I added tonelessly. "She had it on last night before she went out with Larry. I noticed especially, because you're going to give me a wristwatch for Christmas."

"Am I?" He calculated swiftly that Christmas was still several months off and said: "Of course," feeling that the argument could safely be deferred. "I noticed it too. She may have two wristwatches alike. . . ."

Conversation lapsed. Our reflections were not agreeable. For no very adequate reason we both liked Peggy Voigt. There are two reasons why murders must not be left unsolved. One is, of course, to discourage the habit. The other, equally important, is to remove the intolerable shadow of suspicion which lies over the innocent—the shadow which now lay over every person in Palo Alto, Peggy included.

I was aroused from my gloom by the appearance of Pa Ferguson in the door. He was standing with his hands in the pockets of his faded blue jeans. The trousers met with difficulty a few inches below a theoretical waistline, and stayed up by a mysterious dispensation I could not fathom. His straw hat was pushed back from his forehead, and though the day was not yet hot he was perspiring slightly. His face too reflected gloom and dejection. Only the narrowed, surprisingly blue eyes suggested mental activity. They were fixed on Dagobert, who was still

unaware of his presence.

"Say," he drawled finally, "why did you ask Mrs. Karnak that question?"

Dagobert looked up blankly. Pa fidgeted and glanced awkwardly at me. He mopped his forehead with a bandanna to hide a faint blush. "That question," he stammered, "about babies."

Dagobert conquered a smile. "Psychology," he explained.

Pa regarded him doubtfully. "Psychology, huh?" I expected a grunt of derision, but instead Pa tried to figure it out. "Psychology, huh," he repeated. "Like in the magazines where they ask you, was you an only kid and did your Pappy and Mammy get along?"

"Exactly," Dagobert nodded.

"I still don't get it," Pa confessed. "Though I'll say one thing." The beginnings of a smile relieved the worried contours of his face. "Your psychology sure riled McFarlan and Karnak into explainin' that black eye."

Dagobert lighted a cigarette. "You might," he suggested, "ask Larry whether or not Peggy was wearing that wristwatch on their date last night."

Pa's face relapsed into immobility, but I saw a spasm of pain flicker through his eyes.

"Look, son," he said quietly. "You look after the psychology part of this and I'll figure how to find out who done it. Me, or maybe Sheriff MacGuire," he added thoughtfully. "I reckon it's really MacGuire's job. With me bein' only a deputy."

"Are you *afraid* to do it yourself?" Dagobert asked.

"Look, mister," Pa said gruffly, "would you please mind your own business?" He turned to go, but paused at the door. "Before I forget it," he drawled, "how about handin' over whatever it was you picked up under Mrs. Ross's bed this morning before I came!"

"How did you know?" I exclaimed in admiration.

"Never mind how I know," Pa mumbled, still watching Dagobert.

"Maria must have seen me," Dagobert supplied. "It's a clue I'd intended to suppress." He reached into his jacket pocket reluctantly. "You won't like it, Sheriff."

"There's a lot of things around here I don't like," Pa said darkly.

Dagobert took his hand from his pocket. On his extended palm I recognised the small oblong of pale-brown paper. It was the stub of a hand-rolled cigarette.

Pa took it and put it into an envelope. His hand was shaking slightly. As Dagobert had prophesied, he didn't like it. I think the same reflection had occurred to Pa that was occurring to me: Hal Perkins was the only one in Palo Alto who rolled his own cigarettes.

"I guess I ought to run you in for this," he said finally. "Suppressing important evidence."

"Do you think it's important?"

Pa turned on Dagobert a little aggressively. It was the only sign he gave of being rattled. "Who said it was important?" he snapped. "MacGuire will decide whether it's important! Not me. And not you." He calmed down suddenly. "Why, lots of folks around here roll their own cigarettes," he reasoned. One had the feeling he was persuading himself rather than us. "I do myself sometimes. A clue like this could point at anybody."

"You're very fond of Hal Perkins, aren't you?" I said.

Pa sighed. "I've known him since he was knee-high to a grasshopper," he said. "He used to come running down to the store when he was just a little fella, when his pappy got drunk and beat him up. He's nuts, but he's the kindest-hearted guy I ever knew."

"Perhaps you're right to let MacGuire handle this case," Dagobert said.

Pa glared at him. "Who said so?"

"I thought it was your idea."

"It's like this," he explained, picking his teeth thoughtfully. "You see, I ain't got the experience. Maybe some people'd say I ain't got the brains. . . . And anyway, I gotta look after the filling station. So I guess I'll leave it to MacGuire."

The ghost of a smile came into his anxious blue eyes as he extended a fat hand. "To MacGuire and you two. Unless MacGuire decides to put you under arrest," he added. "Well, so

long. Maybe I'll be seeing you some day at the filling station. He left rather abruptly, looking a bit ashamed of himself.

"What's eating Pa?" I said.

"The same thing that's eating us," Dagobert said. "He's afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Afraid that the person who murdered Miranda is someone we all like."

"I don't like anybody," I said harshly. "Let's stop solving the mystery. We went for a walk, but we didn't stop solving the mystery. Solving is perhaps not the word; I mean, the mystery remained with us. Unconsciously it even influenced the direction of our walk, for we started out beyond the corral and climbed the hill behind the house—the same walk which Dwight had taken last night. I don't think we actually hoped it would yield anything of significance. If so, we were disappointed in everything except the view, which was breath-taking."

We sat down on a rocky ledge which jutted out over an *arroyo* or dry river-bed that had torn a precipitous track through the red earth beneath us, uprooting junipers and pinyons on its way to join the river, now in late September hardly more than a trickle meandering through the centre of the valley-triangle which had Palo Alto for an apex and the vast plain of Alamogordo for a base. Across the plains stretched that astonishing phenomenon called the White Sands, an inland sea of snow-white gypsum, foaming in soft breakers against the beige-green shores of the prairie. The illusion of movement was amazing.

I took a deep breath and clung to Dagobert's hand. I looked down below us, where the ranch was a cluster of miniature buildings surrounded by miniature trees. Toy vehicles were parked in front of the patio, and toy figures, human and animal, moved about the yard. Down there murder had taken place. It seemed long and unfair and, from this vantage-point, unreal.

Dagobert was deep in thought. He started suddenly and exclaimed aloud: "I've got it! What a nitwit I am!"

The enchantment had vanished. Pleasing though every

might be, man's vileness won every time. In that moment I was filled with a personal hatred of Miranda's murderer. I asked, almost without interest: "Okay. Who killed her?"

"Killed who?" he said in a daze. "I mean that line in the 'Salisbury Text' of Adam de la Halle. You know that one that doesn't make sense: '*Robin même, Robin m'a*'."

I had to do a little swift mental readjustment. Somehow the events of the past few hours had made me forget that Dagobert was naturally engrossed in thirteenth-century musical drama. His forthcoming study of Adam de la Halle would doubtless be the last word on the subject, and probably the first. It would get excellent reviews in learned journals, and with luck might earn us thirty or forty pounds. His previous work on Guillaume de Machault had actually sold in America and netted us a cool fifty dollars.

"*Robin même, Robin m'a*," I repeated. "Doesn't it make sense?"

"It must be a textual error," he said. "There's another copy in the Vatican which I shall check with, but the line's obviously: *Robins m'aime, Robins m'a, Robins m'a demandee, si m'ara. M'aime, not même.*"

"I'm glad that's settled," I nodded. "Can you make out who the two men are having a chat together down there by the corral?"

He glanced below to where I was pointing. "No," he said dreamily. "Professor Durkhardt's barmy if he thinks they played viols, harps, recorders, and sackbuts exclusively in unison. Even before the thirteenth century, for that matter . . . I think, yes, it's Bill McFarlan and Dwight Karnak. More black eyes? Or a *rapprochement*?"

It seemed to be the latter. Bill and Dwight were evidently in deep and amicable conversation. The two tiny figures were so clearly visible that it seemed odd not to be able to hear them. I took a cigarette from Dagobert's pocket and lighted it. Neither of us felt any inclination to abandon our eyrie; it would be pleasant, though fanciful, to sit up here, godlike and aloof, and allow the mystery to unfold in pantomime beneath us.

We saw a toy ambulance backing from the drive up the narrow alley towards the entrance to the small walled garden. A little later two men, eagerly watched by young Winthrop, who had apparently won the argument about school, carried out a stretcher with presumably the body of Miranda on it. The ambulance followed the rocky road which twisted down towards the main highway, while Winthrop ran out to join Hal by the windmill.

Pa appeared from the kitchen with one of the maids, Maria I think, and after a moment's conversation strolled around the house. We saw him enter the walled garden, standing in thought before Miranda's french windows. Finally he returned to the front of the house, got into his car and drove off. We talked—or rather Dagobert talked—about the influence of the troubadours on the *trouveres* with especial reference to Adam de la Halle.

At about eleven o'clock we saw a familiar sedan approach the house. It was Julian back from El Paso. We rose reluctantly, feeling that our breathing spell had come to an end.

We spoke little as we scrambled down the hill. Though the ranch was no longer visible after we left our ledge, its approach seemed to cast a shadow over us. "Let's not go back," I murmured absurdly. I was shivering. Dagobert drew my arm through his and sensibly said nothing.

It took us nearly half an hour to reach the corral again. Dwight had not over-estimated the time it took to climb the hill. There were half a dozen horses in the corral, the horses we should have ridden on the excursion Miranda had planned for to-day. They seemed curiously high-strung and skittish, possibly from lack of exercise. They snorted as we came up, and bolted towards the far end of the enclosure, as though something had suddenly panicked them. At that moment, Bismark, the dachshund, raced past, his tail between his legs.

Panic can be caught by animals from humans and—as I discovered—vice versa. I clutched at Dagobert's arm and said: "Where's everybody?" forgetting that they were probably in their rooms or in the patio.

At that moment we saw Hal, weaving his way from the out-

buildings around the windmill towards the front of the house. He was singing loudly and out of tune, oblivious of us, and, as I realised a moment later, oblivious of all the world.

*"You ask me why I'm a hobo,
And why I sleep in a ditch . . ."*

He was plastered to the gills, rip, roaring drunk. He tacked uncertainly past us, interrupting his song long enough to hail us: "Howdy, folks," though no look of actual recognition disturbed the glazed look in his eyes. A pink flush showed beneath the weatherbeaten network of his wrinkles. He lurched on, resuming his song.

*"It isn't because I'm lazy,
Nor I just don't wanna be rich."*

We stared after him, wondering if we ought to do anything about it. Though he was in a state sometimes considered to be enviable, there had been something horribly false and jarring about his outburst of gaiety. We heard him begin his song again: "You ask me why I'm a hobo." Then we heard from the direction of the windmill Julian's voice:

"Hal! For God's sake!"

We spun round. Julian had come round the curved stone wall at the base of the well. He didn't see us, but something in his manner sent us both simultaneously running towards the well. Behind me I heard Hal's raucous voice croak in the middle of a note. I heard him sob out something.

It sounded like: "Poor little bastard, poor little bastard."

By this time we had reached the well. We saw now that Julian was not alone there. A crowd had gathered around the well: half a dozen Mexicans, the Karnaks, Peggy, Bill, old Voigt, a young State policeman whom Pa Fergusson had evidently left in charge.

A Mexican labourer's head had just appeared above the rim of the well. He was climbing with difficulty the long rope ladder

CHAPTER XII

Though Windthrop had died in the middle of the morning and within a stone's-throw of a dozen people, we never found out what exactly had happened. The methods of Patrolman Jones, who in the Sheriff's absence represented the law, were not perhaps the best for eliciting what few facts there were. Jones was probably first-class at pinching speeding motorists, but he lacked finesse.

"Okay." He swept the assembly around the fatal well with a look of all-embracing suspicion. "Who pushed the kid in?"

He was disappointed but undeterred when no one answered. He repeated the question irritably, as though we couldn't really expect him to waste all day finding the answer to anything so simple. Dwight Karnak sensibly suggested that we ought to telephone Pa Fergusson.

"Who's doing this, bud?" Jones said.

No one ventured an answer. Jones glowered at us. He was small, swarthy, and restless. He took boyish pride in the Colt .45 which swung from his hip, toying with it hopefully as he stared from face to face. It would have delighted him had one of us suddenly bolted. Being a stranger in these parts, he fixed with unerring wrong-headedness on old Voigt.

"Who are you?" he snapped. "What were you doing when the kid fell into the well?"

"None of your damn business, young man." Voigt snapped back.

We all silently echoed the sentiment, though it was, of course, Jones's business. Jones flushed.

"Is that so?" he said darkly. "We got ways of handling guys like you." Apparently he couldn't at the moment think of any of the ways referred to; he suddenly changed tactics. "Where's the drunk guy?" he demanded.

He meant Hal, I suppose. No one enlightened him. His manner had the effect of making us close our tanks for the moment.

we felt as though we were all on the same side. Jones sensed this. He said sharply:

"Say, are you all in this together?"

Again silence greeted him. I saw Dwight Karnak's big right fist clench and unclench. I knew how he was feeling.

"I got the right to arrest the whole bunch of you," he threatened.

Voigt again broke our conspiracy of silence. "Go ahead," he said, turning on his heel and walking back towards the house.

Jones chased after him, shouting. Voigt continued unperturbed.

"I don't think Dad will need any help," Peggy said dryly. She managed a wan smile, but her eyelashes were wet. "Poor little fellow." She turned away. "If only—if only I'd been tough and *made* him go to school!"

Jones's absence immediately released our tongues, and everybody talked at once. Afterwards I straightened out the tangled conversation and jotted down the gist of it in the notebook I had optimistically labelled *My American Journal*.

It went something like this: Bill McFarlan had discovered the body. This was at eleven twenty-five, five minutes before Dagobert and I returned from our walk. Why Bill had wandered out towards the well he did not explain, except by saying he felt restless. He'd leaned against the side of the well, staring aimlessly down into the shaft, when something at the bottom had caught his eye. It was a small-sized cowboy hat which he recognised as Winthrop's. He had tried to fish it out with a rope and bucket, and had suddenly encountered the floating body.

Bill ran for help. Peggy had appeared from Miranda's private garden, where she said she had spent the past quarter of an hour looking at the roses. Voigt came from the main patio. He too had been alone—reading, it seemed—and no one had seen him for ten or fifteen minutes. The Karnaks had just come in from a ride. They had ridden in different directions and arrived back at the corral within five minutes of each other, Sue first. At Bill's shout for help, Julian had come running from the garages, where he had been tinkering with his car. He found mechanical work congenial when worried or emotionally disturbed, and he had just learned of Miranda's death.

Dagobert was unusually taciturn during the conversation from which this outline of events is boiled down. He asked only one question which seemed to me peculiarly inapposite.

He said to Julian: "What was wrong with your car?"

Julian explained something technical about brake fluid, and we got back to more important facts.

Hal—whose contribution was made later when he had sobered up sufficiently to be coherent—had all this while been sitting on the ground with his back propped up against the pumphouse. He was finishing off a pint of Bourbon and singing "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum." He'd paid no attention to the growing hubbub around the well until Maria had screamed out Winthrop's name. Then he struggled to his feet, shuffled over to the well and blurted out: "I didn't push the poor little bastard in." He steered himself towards the house. This was when Dagobert and I had seen him. Hal remembered having played for a while with Winthrop before returning to his pint of Bourbon. He remembered that Winthrop had insisted on running round the narrow circular rim of the well. He didn't remember whether anyone had approached the well, but maybe he had dropped off to sleep for a while, he wasn't quite sure.

These were all the details we could get. It was impossible to say precisely when Winthrop had died. Certainly at the moment of his fall, for his neck was broken. But how long before the time when Bill had found him no one could be sure. Apart from Hal, whose time sense became vaguer the more he thought of it, Dagobert and I, presumably, had been the last to see the child alive—from our ledge at the top of the hill at eleven o'clock. Presumably. The presumption depended on our agreeing that Winthrop had toppled into the well *by accident*.

"I think he did," Peggy said. "Miranda was always terrified of that well. She never let him go near it."

No one contradicted her. The accident theory was reasonable and comforting. It was much too comforting. Sue was the only one of us with courage enough to put into words what we were all remembering.

"This morning Winthrop said he knew"—she faltered, and a

I admitted. "But I've always heard it well spoken of."

A thin gold case followed the compact out of the handbag. I accepted an oval cigarette with a straw tip and the initials S. K., and a light from her gold Dunhill lighter.

"Three years ago," she said, "Dwight and I didn't have a red cent."

Her dark eyes were wistful as she spoke, and seemed to grow misty at the recollection. I made a non-committal sound, wondering if I were supposed to be sympathetic.

"We lived in one room in the slummy part of Greenwich Village and ate—when there was anything to eat—off the top of Dwight's grand piano. He used to compose all day and most of the night, and I worked as a waitress in a joint on Eighth Avenue to keep us going."

I regarded Sue with real interest for the first time. The clothes which screamed Worth and Paquin, the hair and complexion which were Antoine at his best, the hands which looked as though they had never met dish-water—all these things appeared in a new light against this background of three years ago. It sounded on the surface like one of those success stories in which America abounds, but there was something about the way she told it that made me wonder.

"Didn't anyone ever buy any of Dwight's compositions?" I encouraged her.

"No," she said. "No. But they were *good*. Dam' good. They would have become known eventually. If only he'd—well, I guess I mean—if *we'd* kept on. . . ."

"But I was under the impression Dwight Karnak's music did become known," I said, remembering how "A Moonlit Verandah" had pursued us from juke-box to juke-box all the way from New York.

"That!" The fire which had glowed in Sue Karnak's eyes died down at the monosyllable of contempt. "That tripe!"

I agreed with her, but I didn't say so. You can never tell with people. An ex-friend once agreed with something slighting I had said about a novel of my own.

"No," she went on passionately. "Dwight Karnak wrote real

music in those days. There was a trio which Bela Bartok himself wouldn't have been ashamed of. He wrote violin sonatas and string quartets, two operas, and half a dozen symphonies. Some of it was derivative and some of it didn't quite come off, but he was getting better and better all the time. More individual, less interested in shocking people and straining for effect. He was beginning to go more and more to Bach for spiritual sustenance. I remember him once saying just before—just before we met the Rosses, as a matter of fact—saying that there were only two kinds of musician: those who grasped the fact that Bach was the world's supreme artist, and the others—who didn't know anything about music. Bach!" She broke off with a short laugh of derision. "I wonder what John Sebastian would have thought of 'A Moonlit Verandah'?"

"I seem to remember," I said, hoping my facts were not too wildly inaccurate, "that John Sebastian Bach as Cantor of Leipzig earned about four hundred dollars a year. I imagine he'd have thought highly of the royalties 'A Moonlit Verandah' brings in."

Sue smiled, sighed, and relaxed a bit; she was not inhuman, and the point had obviously occurred to her before. She smoothed the lapels of her green tweed jacket, and extended the half-eaten apple to the roan mare which was leaning over the fence towards us, impatient with so much chitchat.

"There are consolations," she admitted. "Hollywood's full of people—like us, I guess—who make millions and get maudlin after a few drinks about what great artists they'd have been if they hadn't made so much dough." Her eyes half closed again, while the mare munched gratefully on the apple in her hand. "Nevertheless, it is a pity." She said it regretfully rather than bitterly. "Dwight *was* good. . . . And those days in Greenwich Village were fun, real fun. I don't *think* I'm just being sentimental, but maybe I am. Shall we go in and have a drink?"

"Yes," I said, not moving. "Where does Miranda come into the story?"

"Miranda?" she repeated. Her voice had gone flat again. "Oh, Miranda became our best friend. Our patron, as it were."

I don't know whether she wanted to talk about it, but I felt

by remaining expectantly perched where I was she would. I was not disappointed.

"Miranda heard Dwight playing a Sonatina of his own one evening between the acts of a play given in one of those small experimental theatres in Greenwich Village. Miranda used to go slumming like that occasionally. She was just back from Italy and therefore a great authority on music. She met us afterwards and graciously said that Dwight had a great deal of promise. *Promisel* As though she knew anything about it! Anyway, she asked us out to supper at some expensive place, and as we hadn't eaten anything for a week except spaghetti and meat balls, we accepted eagerly. We talked very earnestly about music. I will say for Miranda that she was quick at picking up and airing technical terms, and for a while I thought she might know what she was talking about. She thought it a crying shame that Dwight didn't make any money. I thought so too, and was therefore not at all shocked when she suggested he try his hand in his spare time at breaking into the tinpan-alley racket. She owned stocks, it seemed, in one of the biggest firms of popular music publishers. It was to be spare time only, just to see if Dwight couldn't make enough money on the side to let him continue with his serious career. That, according to Miranda, must *always* come first.

"In the beginning Dwight was doubtful about the whole business, but Miranda was enthusiastic. You never actually met Miranda, did you? If you had, you'd know how her enthusiasms always overrode other people's inertia. It was because they always made sense, I suppose. She was always so demonstrably right. To tell the truth, I had to agree with her, and admit that for Dwight to try tinpan-alley was only sensible.

"He did. He always had a flair for hummable themes. It was a tendency he had to watch in his symphonies. Schubert was beset with the same temptation. Anyway, Dwight's very first effort was a howling success. It was called 'In Lieu of Love,' and dedicated to Miranda Ross. She sold it for him, and was as delighted as we were at its popularity. She urged him to write another. We now had enough money to live on at our standard for the rest of our days, but our standard was rising. Dwight did it again, something

a little better this time, pinched from *Don Giovanni*. It was a flop. This made him furious. Even in those days his temper was bad, though it's got worse. He wrote half a dozen blatant imitations of 'In Lieu of Love,' and each one of them was hailed as 'a new note in American folk music.' We had moved to East Seventieth Street by this time and I had a mink coat. We went around a lot. Dwight never seemed to have time to get back to his quartets. He shaved off his beard and began to go to an English tailor Miranda recommended. I opened accounts at Saks, Fifth Avenue, and all the best stores. Oddly enough, it was at about this time that I began getting my headaches.

"Miranda stayed with us whenever she visited New York, and we flew out here to Palo Alto for week-ends. I liked it, Dwight liked it—and Miranda was thrilled with our prosperity and fame. She felt that they were her own."

Sue stopped suddenly, and again she laughed that brief, humourless laugh of hers. "They *were* her own, of course," she concluded. "If ever two people owed everything they have in the world to someone else, the Karnaks, Dwight and myself, can be said to owe their all to Miranda Ross. . . . And now she's . . . I'm talking too much."

We tossed our apple cores into the middle of the corral and began to walk back to the house. The sight of Patrolman Jones brought us sharply back to present reality. We dodged behind a cactus hedge and approached the patio from the other side. I was sorry Sue had come to the end of her story. What had struck me most about it was the familiarity of its pattern. I mean, Miranda had played the same part—the *deus-ex-machina* Lady-Bountiful—that she had played in Bill McFarlan's life. There was the same benevolent interference, the same beneficent rescue of the struggling musician—or in Bill's case, the underpaid scientific worker—followed by worldly success. Followed by "A Moonlit Verandah" in one case, and in the other by Soap.

There was one rather blunt question I was longing to ask her. I decided this was my opportunity.

"Did you *like* Miranda?"

"Miranda was my best friend," she answered dully.

MURDER BEGINS AT HOME

It reminded me somewhat of my own voice when I had Dagobert that everyone adored Miranda. I tried again. "But did you really like her?"

Sue shook her head. "No," she said tonelessly. "I don't know why. I tried to. But I never did. In fact, I think I disliked her. Not very actively, of course, just instinctively. Is that a rotten thing to say in the present circumstances?"

"I don't see why," I said. "Personally, though I never met her I disliked her too. Dagobert was once keen on her."

"So was Dwight!" Sue exclaimed. "At least, he thought he was. I was jealous at one time until I realised——" She stopped, wondering if we knew each other well enough to go into a huddle over such girlish confidences.

"What?" I prompted, steering her from the patio gate out towards the garages. "What did you realise?"

Sue hesitated. She had flushed slightly. I expected something really *outré*, but all she said was: "I realised Miranda was incapable of having a love-affair of her own."

I thought of Miranda's beauty as I had seen it this morning. "Incapable?" I echoed incredulously.

"Not physically incapable," she said. "Emotionally incapable. Miranda shared other people's emotions. She had other people's love-affairs. She lived other people's lives—her family's, her friends'. She would get as near the fire as she could. But Miranda Ross would never burn herself. Men have an unpleasant word for women like that—not too unpleasant," she added bitterly.

Sue's analysis of Miranda was not altogether unlike Dagobert's. Dagobert had put it more politely—that Miranda lived on a pedestal of virtue. I recalled his hypothesis that in slipping from is pedestal she had met her death. I asked Sue's opinion.

"Don't you think she may have had a slight skid?" I suggested. Sue shook her head scornfully, and with decision. "Miranda never slept with a man in her life," she said. "Not even Julian."

CHAPTER XIII

Suz. and I parted company at the patio arch. She went to her room to change into a dark frock more in keeping with the occasion, while I, not having anything which didn't need ironing except the ancient russet linen dress I was wearing, lingered aimlessly at the gate.

In spite of talk about drinks before luncheon, the patio was empty. From somewhere around by the corral I heard Hal's voice. He was still singing, but his voice sounded groggy and even less tuneful than before. Jones had evidently found him, for I heard his exasperated efforts to arrest "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" in its interminable course.

"Hey! Are you going to answer my questions or not?" Jones put in every time a stanza ended.

Hal in the main ignored the demand. Once he stopped singing long enough to say: "Okay, okay, I pushed him in," and then began singing again.

"Listen, bud——" Jones shouted.

But Hal didn't listen, and I gave it up myself. There wasn't anything I could do about it. I drifted into the patio. I had been looking for Dagobert, but just before entering the patio I had caught a glimpse of him across the way poking about the garage. So much for Adam de la Halle. He looked busy, so I didn't join him. Probably we had developed a flat tyre during the night, and Dagobert has a habit of handing me a wrench and saying: "Get that thing off."

I strolled towards the library, not so much in order to brush up on nuclear physics, as because I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Old Voigt was alone in the library, shouting at the telephone operator. The window was open, and his back was turned towards me, so naturally I eavesdropped. Voigt finally got his connection; he would probably have got it sooner had he been less profane. The name of the man he spoke to was familiar.

MacGuire. It took me a second to place it, then I remembered that Sheriff MacGuire was Pa Fergusson's boss.

"Look here, MacGuire, you're Sheriff of this one-horse place, aren't you? . . . My name's Voigt. Voigt. I voted for you last election—probably. Now it may just have reached your ears that my daughter, Mrs. Miranda Ross, was found this morning brutally slain. . . . It has, has it? Good. I hoped you'd hear about it eventually. I want action. . . . No, I don't want Pa Fergusson. I don't want the hick proprietor of a filling station mucking around in a case that's beyond his mental capacity. He's an old fool and you know it. I want you to get him off this case. I don't want to see him around my house again. If I do, I warn you there'll be a stink. . . . Look here, MacGuire," the phrase this time was more persuasively spoken, "why don't you personally take charge of the case? Come on out yourself and leave that dumb deputy of yours to watch his gasoline pumps. Otherwise I'll raise hell, go to what's-his-name, you know, the D.A. . . ."

For a moment Voigt listened wearily while MacGuire spoke, punctuating the conversation with occasional "Yesses" and "Hey! Wait a minute." Probably MacGuire, whose office was as Voigt had reminded him elective, was attempting to soothe the irate voter. He must have mentioned Patrolman Jones, for Voigt repeated the name.

"Jones?" he said. Somewhat to my astonishment Voigt did not explode at the word. "Jones? Sure, he's all right. In fact, young Jones is doing a first-rate job. I'd leave him on it, if I were you. That's what it needs, young men with a little imagination. Do what you like, MacGuire, but get rid of Fergusson."

He banged the receiver down and I retired hastily, wondering if he had gone crazy. Jones—first-rate—a young man with imagination! Then I realised that I had entirely missed the point of the telephone call. It struck me forcibly a second later. Old Voigt's sole object in telephoning Sheriff MacGuire was to get rid of Pa Fergusson.

I found Dagobert in front of the house. He beckoned to me from the bonnet of our car which he had just managed to start.

"By the way," he said, "I'm off for awhile. Make my apologies at luncheon."

"Far be it from me to pry," I said, "but where are you going?"

"Alamogordo, probably. I want to look up Pa. I'll have a bite at his place."

I didn't like his studied casualness. "I'll go with you. The air will do me good."

"Haven't you anything you've got to do around the house? Sewing or something?"

I had taken my place firmly in the front seat by this time. "Had you said outright you were going to call on Yolanda," I explained, "I might have assumed you meant Pa Fergusson and stayed quietly at home with my knitting."

"I'll never learn about women," he said, grinding the gears excruciatingly. "You know, a wife can be a great handicap to an amateur sleuth. Still, it's nice to have a cosy home to come back to after a day's work."

"You must try that some time," I nodded.

We bumped out of the drive, pursued by angry shouts from Jones, to whom we waved cordially. We covered the perilous mile which led to the main highway and Pa's Place with fine disregard for springs. Our cars always run faster downhill than up.

"I don't know much about cars," Dagobert informed me unnecessarily, "but do you remember the time we ran out of brake fluid? Knoxville, I think, or maybe it was Nashville."

The incident was one of many such in our halting progress from New York, but I nodded. He went on at length to explain that there was a little iron box with a plug on top of it which you uncrewed in order to put in more brake fluid. I tried to follow the technicalities, feeling that the conversation could not be entirely academic. I supposed it was a prelude to his announcing that we were about to fork out another thirty or forty dollars for repairs. As I was naturally longing to tell him about my talk with Sue and about Voigt's telephone call to Sheriff MacGuire, I listened with impatience. Then suddenly I forgot all about Voigt and Sue.

"This morning, while Winthrop was falling into the well," Dagobert said, "Julian was in the garage renewing the brake fluid in his car. Remember?"

I nodded, edging forward in my seat. I think I already knew what was coming.

"Only," Dagobert continued, eyeing me and enjoying the moment, "only the plug where he puts in his brake fluid hasn't been unscrewed for months. . . ."

Our front wheels hit a patch of soft gravel on the edge of the road. Dagobert is not a bad driver when he watches the road, but with pardonable complacency he was watching me. I grabbed at the wheel and jerked us back on to the road. We nearly landed up in the opposite ditch.

"So Julian *wasn't* in the garage!" I gasped.

"You have adorable freckles, Jane, and an attractive smile," he said, righting the car, "but not a logical mind. All we can say with certainty is that Julian was not in the garage renewing his brake fluid. He may not have been there at all. He may have been there—doing something else."

"You make it all so clear," I said, my head spinning.

We had almost reached the main highway by this time, and barring accidents we had a reasonable chance of getting to Pa's Place alive. The thought of another Hiya-Toots became not unattractive. The land through which we drove still belonged to the Palo Alto ranch, and since we were heading south, I assumed that this must be the South Range.

This time my logic was better. Across a sweep of mesa land, copper-green in the midday sun and dotted with gnarled junipers beneath which cattle sought in vain for shade, I saw Julian astride his mustang, jog-trotting along the arid river-bed as though he owned the place. I remembered, with an uncomfortable sense of oppression in the pit of my stomach, that since Miranda's death he probably *did* own the place.

"If I refused to sleep with you," I said to Dagobert, "would you kill me?"

"Indubitably," he nodded, showing no sign of alarm.

We parked our car at Pa's Place just beside Larry's flash

Chrysler. Dagobert leapt out, attempting to vault over the door in the best tradition. He barked his shin in the process, but he did it. He paused beside the Chrysler, glancing at the doorknob. I learned later he was making a mental note of where Larry bought the thing. His idea was not, unfortunately, to buy one like it.

"You wait here," he said to me. "I'll see if Pa's in. I'll fetch you out a Hiya-Toots and a Root Beer."

Both of us knew from the absence of Pa's car that Pa was not in. I reached the screen door a second after Dagobert had gone through it. Yolanda was leaning forward across the counter looking up at him with an entrancing smile which she had obviously just switched on. It was a purely instinctive reaction, as automatic as the way a bird starts singing at sunrise, and as meaningless. And also, I must confess, as engaging.

"Hiya-Toots," Dagobert suggested, clearly at a loss for words.

"Hiya, yourself," Yolanda murmured softly.

The catch in her voice was effective but not entirely part of her normal equipment. I realised that Yolanda, far from being her usual laughing self, had been crying. A wet handkerchief was rolled in a sodden ball on the counter beside her, her make-up had run, and she sniffed slightly.

At the back of the store I glimpsed Larry, stretched out luxuriously in a cane-bottom chair, his handsome sombrero tilted over his forehead. He was chewing gum and whistling on a stick of wood with one of those same black-handled jack-knives with which Miranda had been stabbed. They were standard cutlery in the South-west, we discovered, and practically everyone had them. I wondered how much Larry had to do with Yolanda's tears.

He had nothing to do with them, as it turned out. It seemed that the news from Palo Alto had already reached the filling station. I was touched, and surprised, to think that Yolanda had shed tears for Miranda, until Dagobert said:

"Winthrop was probably seeing how near he could get to the rim of the well."

Yolanda nodded, and the tears rushed again into her eyes. She made no effort to control them, but let them stream.

cheeks. "He was a good little kid," she said huskily. "Even if everybody hated him. . . . Do you want something to eat?"

We ordered hamburgers and asked where Pa was. Pa was in Alamogordo seeing Sheriff MacGuire. He wanted to get out of the whole business. He had plenty to do at the filling station without mixing up in any murders. Besides, who cared who killed Miranda Ross?

It was a point. I watched Yolanda's crimson-tipped but efficient fingers preparing our hamburgers, dipping the big, light buns in the frying-pan, slicing the raw onions and dill pickles. Her slim shoulders still trembled as she controlled an occasional spasmodic sob, but she had pushed back her shining black hair, dabbed powder on her nose, and was eyeing Dagobert speculatively. I don't think there was a conflict of emotions. I think she was genuinely able to weep for Winthrop and flirt with Dagobert concurrently.

Larry meanwhile was apparently unaware of our existence. He continued to chew gum, whittle, and rock himself in total disregard of what was going on around him. Dagobert asked what Pa was doing around midnight last night, and Yolanda explained that he had been in Alamogordo attending an annual function of the Oddfellows. She served our hamburgers—or rather she served Dagobert's and shoved mine at me. He glanced at the imitation tortoiseshell brooch on her bosom. He could see it fairly easily, as it was only an inch or two from his eyes when she leaned forward across the counter. It consisted of intertwining initials. Y. H. F.

"What's the 'H' stand for?" he asked, possibly to prove to me he was still capable of speech.

"Hernandez," Yolanda smiled.

"Any relation to Maria Hernandez, up at Palo Alto?"

"She's my cousin. Do you like Maria?" she teased. "She'll tell me if you do. Maria and I tell each other *everything*."

I rose with my hamburger. "Possibly I'd better finish this outside," I suggested.

"The jealous type," Dagobert confided to Yolanda.

Yolanda puckered up her mouth in mock astonishment.

"Ye-es?" she whispered in awe. Then she burst into a fit of giggles.

Larry did not share his wife's mirth. He pushed his sombrero an inch or two back from his brow and spat on the floor. He looked peculiarly unamused and depressed. A car had stopped outside and was hooting for service. He looked at Yolanda and jerked a thumb in the direction of the front door. Yolanda without protest went to the door and out to attend to the customer. Larry Ferguson believed in the dignity of work—his wife's work. He pushed the hat forward on his brow again and returned to the serious business of chewing, whistling, and rocking. We munched our hamburgers and examined the lemon-meringue pies in the glass case on the counter. Dagobert tried conversation.

"Late night?" he said in the direction of Larry. Larry ignored the query and Dagobert repeated it. This time a grunt came from the rocking-chair.

"Yeah."

"Heavy date, maybe?"

This time the response was even less encouraging. There was no response at all. The Gary Cooper charm act of yesterday had given way to that of the traditional Bad Man, the taciturn member of the rustlers' gang who knows how to keep his mouth shut.

Yolanda's return cheered things up a bit. She put a slug in the juke-box, and we recognised the sugary strains of "A Moonlit Verandah." It was Yolanda's favourite tune. She swayed, hands on hips, rhythmically from the juke-box to the counter, a dreamy look of invitation in her eyes.

"If you weren't a piker," I said to Dagobert, "you'd dance with her."

To my horror he nodded. "It's an idea," he agreed, untangling his legs from the stool on which he was perched.

The entire performance apparently seemed quite a novel to Yolanda. She nestled into Dagobert's arms as though the ball had been measured for them. I was gratified to see Dagobert trip over her feet. He is an authority on thirties-era ballroom dances, but weak on the slow foxtrot. Larry, to be fair,

than I, ignored the whole sordid business. My chief concern was that somebody might suddenly come in. While I pretended not to watch, Dagobert and Yolanda exchanged—if I interpreted the matter aright from Yolanda's laughing eyes and his expression of fatuity—sweet nothings. That is, I hoped they were nothings.

I had never before realised what an extraordinarily long piece "A Moonlit Verandah" is. It dragged on interminably. During it I saw Yolanda's lips pout, part invitingly, sulk, droop, quiver, then curve into laughter again. Her eyes were consecutively dreamy, longing, fierce, tearful, and sparkling.

"You already know her telephone number," I reminded Dagobert when he returned not at all sheepishly to my side. "I'll say one thing for dancing with you: a girl certainly goes through the emotional gamut. From A to B. Anticipation to Bed."

"I did all right," he murmured. "Let's have some pie."

Yolanda served us with complete lack of self-consciousness. "The Moonlit Verandah" episode was evidently buried, and she again worked behind the counter. Yolanda was highly adaptable.

The lemon-méringue pie aroused Larry where we had failed. He said "Hey!" and jerked his thumb again. Yolanda took him a piece of pie and a cup of coffee.

"What time did our talkative friend get in last night?" Dagobert inquired when she returned.

"Him?" she shrugged. "How should I know?"

"He might have made a noise taking off his boots," Dagobert said.

Larry had risen, put down his coffee and pie, and strolled over to the counter beside us. He walked very slowly, tossing the jack-knife, with which he had already eaten one mouthful of pie, up and down in the palm of his hand. He looked terrifically casual.

"Say, fellah," he drawled, "you're asking a lot of questions around here this morning."

"Yes," Dagobert agreed cheerfully, his mouth full of pie. "How's your alibi for last night when Mrs. Ross was murdered?"

The knife in Larry's hand flicked suddenly through the air.

The point sank an inch or two into the wooden counter beside Dagobert's coffee cup.

"How do you do that?" Dagobert asked admiringly, removing the knife and trying it himself. He failed miserably. He handed the knife back to Larry. "Do it again," he urged.

Larry recovered the knife. "Men have got killed with knives like this," he said significantly.

"Yeah," Yolanda jeered, "but not by rats like you! . . . In the back maybe," she amended generously. "Or maybe women and children."

Larry's handsome face went puce. He turned from Dagobert to the Mexican girl, his hand raised. "Shut up, you tramp. Or I'll slap you down."

I'm not sure what Yolanda replied. It was in Spanish, but I had the feeling she was holding her own. It went on for some time, and Larry, muttering profanity, finally retreated.

"I didn't get the gist of all that," Dagobert said. "But I gather it's Round One to Mrs. Larry Fergusson. Right?"

"You bet it's right," Yolanda said. "Round one, two, three, and every other round!" She shot a brief glance of utter contempt in the direction of her husband.

"Listen, children," I said, putting in a question which had crossed my mind several times since yesterday. "Why don't you two make it up and have a nice divorce?"

The idea clearly appealed. I couldn't understand why it hadn't occurred to them before.

"We could do that—now," Yolanda said. She brought her husband graciously into the discussion. "Say, Handsome, how about it?"

"The sooner the better," Larry growled.

"Why only *now*?" Dagobert asked.

"Mind your own business," Larry said.

"On account *Miranda* wouldn't hear of it!" Yolanda sneered. "Miranda Ross was too snooty and high-minded to believe in such a low-class thing as divorce. So she come and souped up to us and said: Be good, kiddies, kiss and make up, and Auntie Miranda will give you both a nice pat on the cheek—and that

sucker just said: Yes, ma'am, like he was scared as hell of her."

"Were you scared as hell of her?" Dagobert asked Larry.

Larry spat like a man who isn't scared of anything. "Naw," he said. "She gets everything screwy. Mrs. Ross was just good to us, that's all. But you can't never expect gratitude from a Mex." He spat again and returned to his pie and coffee. We paid the bill and tactfully rose. Yolanda and Larry doubtless had business to talk over.

Outside Dagobert suggested that a walk would be pleasant. I agreed with him; the atmosphere inside Pa's Place had become a little thick. I realised my mistake a moment later.

"You take the walk," Dagobert said, tinkering with the carburettor, which was an essential preliminary to starting our car. "The country between here and the ranch looked attractive. I only wish I could join you."

"Dagobert!" I tried to keep the tremor of alarm out of my voice. "You're not—you're not going back into Pa's Place?" My first thought was not of Yolanda, but of Larry and Larry's knife.

"I may later," he admitted. "First, there are a couple of errands I have to do in Alamogordo. Do you mind awfully?"

I did mind, I don't know why. But I recognised the mild tone of his voice, which meant that argument was futile. I said, fairly convincingly: "No, of course not," but I found myself clutching on to the sleeve of his jacket.

He patted my back reassuringly and brushed his lips against my forehead. "Yes, you do," he said. "But I'll be back at Palo Alto in a couple of hours. . . . By the way, you may be interested. Yolanda was young Winthrop's mother."

CHAPTER XIV

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when I stood in the middle of U.S. Highway Number 70 waving good-bye to Dagobert and the battered jalopy which had become such an intimate, frequently exasperating, and sometimes costly part of our lives. I hoped he wouldn't have a flat tyre, at least until he was out of sight.

He turned and waved his tweed fishing hat at me, and in the process nearly collided with a truck. I felt rather forlorn as he vanished, and horribly alone. He had been increasingly vague about the errands which took him to Alamogordo, even though I had finally found time to tell him about my talk with Sue and Voigt's talk with Sheriff MacGuire and to remind him that "we were in This Thing Together."

I don't know why I always feel nervous and apprehensive when Dagobert goes off on his own. I suppose I have a melodramatic turn of imagination or perhaps I'm the clinging type. Actually nothing very tragic ever happens on these occasions. Sometimes he comes back with an early manuscript of an unknown Florentine poet which was such a bargain—say, the exact amount we have in our current bank account—that it would have been madness not to buy it. Once he "picked up" a Tudor four-poster which was too large for our bedroom and meant moving into a new flat. At worst he returns with a political refugee, generally one who speaks only Rumanian or Hungarian, whom we feed for a while and put up on the sofa in the study. But he almost never comes home insensible or physically battered.

But this is in London, not Alamogordo. Nor at home is his normal errand to look for a murderer. I brought myself sharply to with the reflection that if any murderers were to be encountered, I was much more apt to meet them at Palo Alto than Dagobert was in Alamogordo. Probably he would make for the nearest drugstore and have one of those chocolate malted-milk things for

which he'd acquired such a morbid taste. I decided to walk rapidly up to the ranch and get on with the serious business.

I started out at a pace appropriate for a walk across Exmoor in late September. In a hundred yards I went native and slowed down to a sensible one mile an hour creep. Winthrop had been Yolanda's son. He was the bit of trouble Pa had mentioned having had with Yolanda during Larry's absence overseas. This explained the child's conviction that he was a bastard. What else did it explain? Nothing, that I could see. Miranda had adopted him. He had loathed her. Query: had Miranda loathed him? Tentative answer: yes, since loathing is most often reciprocal. And Winthrop had died. But there was no causal sequence there. Miranda had been murdered first. Oh dear, it was getting hot. I saw what the cattle beneath the juniper trees were driving at. Why did Miranda loathe him? Because she loathed all children? And what gave me that notion? Oh yes, because Sue told me Miranda never slept with a man in her life. As Dagobert said, I haven't a logical mind. Have I a nice smile? Anyway, it was sweet of him to say so. Did Miranda loathe Winthrop for any especial reason? *Who was Winthrop's father?*

I gave up the stream-of-consciousness approach. In fact, I gave up. Period. Dear Dagobert, he would find out all about it this afternoon in Alamogordo—unless he went to the movies instead—and tell us the whole story this evening over long, cool drinks in the patio. I wished I hadn't thought of long, cool drinks.

I thought of an even more depressing subject: my winter wardrobe. By letting out the hem of my fawn tweed suit—that is, unless I had used bits of it already for patching—and by buying a new apple-green blouse I might just have one wearable costume. The afternoon and dinner frock situation was desperate, though there was that black rag which Dagobert was always monotonously admiring. A clever woman could do something with it probably. I might just as well start this afternoon by ripping out the seams.

With this laudable but obviously doomed plan in mind, I hastened forward. At the end of five minutes I found a shady spot beneath a cottonwood tree and sat down. I lighted a cigarette

and opened the magazine I'd bought at Pa's Place. I read the fashion notes, the Hollywood News, and got immensely interested in a story about high-life in Monte Carlo, only to discover it was a serial to be continued next month. An odd thought crossed my mind, a thought which both comforted and disturbed me: before the next instalment of that story appeared, we would know who had murdered Miranda.

Miranda: here we were again. The woman was supposed to be dead. I was sick of her very name, but every time I let my mind wander there she was. Miranda dead dominated the life of Palo Alto as surely as Miranda alive had done. An even odder thought flitted across my mind like a wisp of cloud passing across the sun. *Had Miranda planned it this way?*

I recognised the symptoms of softening of the brain and stood up. I walked along for a time wondering what the names of the wild plants were; hardy, prickly growths, with crude, bold colours so different from the tormentil and milkwort and Herb Robert of my own Somerset. I met a small Mexican child following a diminutive donkey laden with faggots. We stared at each other cautiously. I asked her what her name was.

"Miranda Gonzaga," she said.

Shortly afterwards the first car which had come along the road approached me. It slowed down and stopped. The driver, its only occupant, stuck his head out of the window.

"Can I give you a lift?" he asked. It was Dr. Carter.

I crawled in gratefully, without even inquiring where he was going, wondering if he would mind if I took off my shoes.

"I saw your husband in Alamogordo," he told me. "He was —" He hesitated.

"Having a drink," I suggested.

"Well, he was in the Yucca Bar," the doctor smiled. "Of course, he may have gone in only for some salted peanuts, but the thing in his hand *looked* like a glass." His pleasant face became grave. "No, seriously, Mrs. Brown, you can hardly blame any of us for needing an extra shot or two today . . . Mr. Ross, and then the child . . ."

"Do you think Winthrop was murdered?" I asked

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "I'd never even thought of it. Has it been suggested? The autopsy revealed nothing except what you'd expect if a child tumbled head-first down a thirty-foot well. How do you and your husband like the South-west?"

I told him we loved everything about it except the way the screen-doors slammed and people were murdered. Dr. Carter himself was an enthusiast for New Mexico. Originally from Ohio (everyone in America is originally from somewhere else), he had been stationed near Alamogordo during the war, and had fallen in love with the place. He'd started practice in Alamogordo as soon as he was discharged from the army. This afternoon he was making a few calls on outlying houses on the Palo Alto ranch. None was pressing, and he would be delighted to drive me up to the house first. I explained that as my husband was soaking in low Alamogordo dives, I was in no hurry.

The favourable impression I had gained of Dr. Carter from my brief glimpse of him outside Pa's Place yesterday and this morning in Miranda's room increased. It became outright veneration when he suggested that the Garcias, on whom we first called, might give me a cup of coffee. They did; and though I could not exchange a word with them since they spoke no English, they were delightful. Innumerable small Garcias watched me drinking coffee from the kitchen door while Mrs. Garcia, wrinkled, dressed in picturesque rags, played hostess with a kind of old-world charm which hinted at aristocratic Spanish forbears.

One of the Garcia girls was named Miranda. The oldest boy was named Ross. We drank coffee out of noticeably expensive-looking china, of which Mrs. Garcia was justly proud. It had been a gift from Miranda.

"Mrs. Ross did everything for the tenants of Palo Alto," Dr. Carter told me, as we got back into the car.

So far we had successfully avoided Miranda, but it was bound to come. I settled back with a cigarette and let him tell me what he knew. It was plain that his admiration for Miranda had never wavered. She was a saint.

"I'm supposed to have had a scientific training," he said. "I was taught to judge, not by feelings and impressions, but by

facts. The facts are that the Mexican labourers on Palo Alto are better paid, better housed, and better cared for than anywhere in this part of the country. The facts are that Mrs. Miranda Ross was herself personally responsible for this. I didn't know her or her family intimately, but in the course of professional visits--and naturally from the gossip you can't help hearing in a place this size--I've formed my own opinion of the Palo Alto set-up. How she stood for any of them is more than I can understand!"

He grinned apologetically at the vehemence of his own voice. "I shouldn't talk to you like this, of course," he admitted. "But we're both more or less foreigners in these parts, and I'd like to get it off my chest."

"Let's start with Mr. Voigt," I suggested.

"Voigt or any of the rest of them!" He snorted. "Mrs. Ross spoiled them all: it was the only fault she had. The result was they all sponged on her, and not one of them did a day's honest work in his life. Voigt, Ross himself, Hal Perkins, and Peggy."

"But I assumed that Mr. Voigt," I said, trying to keep to one subject at a time, "was a man of considerable private income—I mean that he didn't have to work if he didn't want to."

"Voigt hasn't a cent," he told me. "None of them has. The family fortune was made by Mrs. Ross's grandfather, old William Van Vorhees Voigt, of the VVV Shipping Lines. He was apparently a wily old pirate, and when he died he left all his money to his granddaughter Miranda, knowing perfectly well that if he left it to Miranda's father he would go through it in a year. So Miranda made her father a handsome allowance until--as I understand it, and mind you, this is only Alamogordo gossip--until there was some trouble and, well, she very generously invited him to come from New York and live with her at Palo Alto."

"What happened to Mrs. Voigt—I mean, Miranda's mother?"

Dr. Carter hesitated. "There's no reason," he decided. "why I shouldn't talk about it. Everybody else does. She's connected with the trouble I mentioned. Her name was Margaret Henry's named after her—and she was a Ziegfeld Follies girl. Round about nineteen-fifteen she was the rage of Broadway, and the

blades from Princeton, Harvard, and Yale used to storm her dressing-room by the hundred. She married Voigt, and to everyone's amazement they settled down quietly in a country place somewhere on Long Island, where Miranda was born, and about fourteen years later Peggy. Voigt and she seemed completely happy until nineteen-thirty-five. Then one day—bang!—Margaret, in her early forties but as attractive as ever, ups and runs off with an Italian tenor. It's splashed all over the *Daily Mirror* and *News*, and makes the biggest scandal of the year. Voigt gets tight all over the place, and tells reporters he'll never love anyone but Margaret, and that he'll shoot the Wop tenor on sight. This is about the time old Van Vorhees Voigt dies and leaves his entire fortune to Miranda. He'd never forgiven his son for marrying a chorus girl, anyway.

"Well, the next big newspaper story is that the tenor has left Margaret flat in Biarritz or some place, and Margaret has come crawling on her knees back to hubby. Hubby, in the words of the cheap Press, is dithering with joy; but daughter Miranda, who now holds the purse-strings, says nuts to that. Mom is a Fallen Woman. Mom shall never darken the ancestral doors again. Pop gets his allowance on the condition, and only on the condition, that he never sees the scarlet creature again."

"And does he see her again?" I asked, as he paused.

"He's got to eat," the doctor shrugged. "And drink."

"What's happened to Margaret?"

Dr. Carter frowned at the question and looked a little worried. I wondered if it were occurring to him that Miranda's part in the story he'd told me was not so endearing as he had perhaps intended to make it. Her moral attitude may have been irreproachable, but she could certainly not be accused of letting her heart run away with her. His hesitancy had another cause.

"About a week ago," he said, "there was a small item tucked away in the newspapers. It was to the effect that Margaret Voigt, fifty-eight, ex-Ziegfeld beauty, had died of an overdose of veronal in a cheap boarding-house in Dallas, Texas."

CHAPTER XV

By the time Dr. Carter delivered me at the ranch-house, I knew a great deal more about my late hostess, though I was far from having any clearer idea of who might have murdered her. Dr. Carter's feeling was that Miranda herself had justifiable motives for murdering practically every member of her family, but he could not see any reason why they should possibly want to be rid of her. Personally, I was beginning to see plenty of reasons.

We argued awhile about Miranda's behaviour towards her mother; Dr. Carter overbore me by stating that it was based on her love for her father, whom she had since looked after, pampered, rescued from scrapes, and financially supported. Freud, I thought vaguely, and let the doctor maintain his opinion, meanwhile maintaining my own.

Peggy was another one Dr. Carter took a poor view of. Peggy, according to him, suffered from arrested development. At twenty-three she ought either to have a job or career of her own or else run around a bit with young men as normal girls of her age did. Instead, she behaved like the perennial tomboy, swearing like a trooper, neglecting her appearance, and causing Miranda continual embarrassment.

"I admit she's a diamond in the rough. At least, she's in the rough," I amended. "But her attitude towards Bill McFarlan last night didn't strike me as exactly abnormal."

Dr. Carter took it back about young men, or at least he modified his statement. There had been two or three young men in Peggy's life, or at least so the whispering gallery at Allen's gordo reported. One of them was wildly inappropriate—an employed bum who called himself an archaeologist, who wanted to take her in a camping trailer down to Yucatan and Guatemala. Miranda had reluctantly put her foot down on that. Another was an artist who had since then made some success in

absurdly fallen in love with Miranda herself, and had to be tactfully got rid of.

"Mrs. Ross, I know, did everything in her power to civilise Peggy," he said. "Piano teachers, dancing lessons, clothes from New York, even a French tutor, but Peggy grew ruder and more gauche. She'd spend her time playing with the Mexicans on the ranch and riding bareback all over the place. She was a great disappointment to Mrs. Ross. But," he added brightly, "they say you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

I liked Dr. Carter—one couldn't help it—but I should not have expected him to hold any very original views about, say, Picasso or Kafka or Adam de la Halle. He had what is known as a normal, healthy attitude towards people and things, and that's why his opinions were worth listening to. He could be trusted to mirror local public opinion about Palo Alto far more faithfully than Pa Fergusson, for instance. I already suspected that Pa's mind worked much more deviously.

I encouraged him to discuss the others. Hal Perkins, he admitted, was a different problem from Peggy. Hal's barbarian tastes and habits did not arise, like Peggy's, from sheer wrong-headedness. He at least was genuinely feeble-minded. Dr. Carter didn't dislike him, no one did. Hal was a pathetic sort, and quite harmless. The kids and the Mexicans and the stray dogs adored him. He understood them and they understood him. But he was Miranda's half-brother-in-law, and she felt responsible for him.

"That was the keynote of Mrs. Ross's character," he said. "A sense of responsibility. None of the others has a trace of it."

When Miranda came back from Europe after the war, she found that Julian had let poor Hal wander off on his own. Hal was leading the life of a hobo, sleeping literally in ditches, picking up an occasional dollar by doing odd jobs, calling at back doors for scraps of food, a burden on society, and scarcely an advertisement for the family at Palo Alto.

Listening to this account, I couldn't help remembering the abandon with which Hal had sung the words: "You ask me why I'm a hobo and why I sleep in the ditch? It isn't because I'm lazy, no. I just don't wanna be rich."

I said: "Maybe Hal liked being a bum."

"That's hardly the point," he replied. "Mrs. Ross couldn't let him go on like that. She sent Julian after him, and ever since then Hal, I'm glad to say, has had a good, comfortable home."

About Julian himself Dr. Carter held even more decided views. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew that Julian Ross, who had been a promising, in fact a brilliant science student at Yale, had never done a stroke of work since he'd married the heiress of the Voigt millions. He'd simply lived on her.

"But didn't he own the Palo Alto ranch?" I asked.

Nominally the ranch had belonged to the Rosses, the doctor explained, but when Julian married Miranda—back in thirty-five, shortly after the Voigt bust-up—the place was run down and so heavily mortgaged that it was almost valueless. All this was long before Dr. Carter's time, but the facts were locally well known. Julian's mother was a bit of a warhorse, one of the old-timers who had arrived in New Mexico in a covered wagon. She had buried two husbands, Ross, Julian's father, who had built the ranch-house, and later, Perkins, Hal's father, who had been one of her cowboys, a good-natured, lazy fellow who was supposed to have drunk himself to death. She'd gone right on ranching, and though she saved enough money to put Julian through Yale, she'd lived to her dying day in the old way to which she was accustomed, eating in the kitchen with the farm hands, refusing to "have any truck with" such new-fangled things as indoor sanitation and electric light.

When Miranda arrived from the East as Julian's bride, she had found a primitive, ramshackle habitation; a fitter dwelling for the pigs and chickens which wandered at will all over the place than for civilised human beings. It was typical of Miranda that, instead of packing up and returning to New York, she should at once set about putting the ranch in order. She paid off the mortgages, fired the less reputable hired hands, employed a host of builders, plumbers, and interior decorators, and even a landscape gardener brought out from the East. The Palo Alto of the present day began to take shape.

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Rumour said that she had encountered doughty opposition at

first from Julian's mother. The old woman insisted that Palo Alto suited her as it was. She fought Miranda over every proposed improvement, and refused to eat in the new "fancy" dining-room or to use "them sissy" bathrooms. The betting in the local pool-rooms and barber-shops was that the old woman would have Miranda out of the place in six months.

They didn't know Miranda. Palo Alto continued to blossom. The patio was built, the sanitary conditions of Mexican labourers' houses were improved, blood stock appeared in the corrals, there was an article with illustrations of the ranch in *House Beautiful*. The old woman abandoned the struggle. She had at last met more than her match. As the local phrase expressed it, "She up and died."

Julian theoretically now ran the ranching part of Palo Alto. But as everybody knew, he was bone lazy, and spent half his time in the library reading books which never got him anywhere. He did a bit of riding, and experimented unsuccessfully with new breeds of cattle. He planted fruit trees which didn't bear fruit and tried out a new North African grass which immediately died. In a word, he played at ranching and lost his money—or rather he lost his wife's money. Not that Miranda cared. She had plenty. And no one ever heard her say a cross word to him. She spoiled him just as she spoiled the others.

"The name Ross," Carter said, "used to mean something in these parts long before I came. Now Julian is known in the neighbourhood as Miranda Voigt's husband."

"I shouldn't think he'd awfully like that," I said.

Dr. Carter laughed shortly. "Julian's a nice fellow," he said, "but no one ever accused him of excessive pride. Why, he didn't even go into the Services after Pearl Harbour! They say his wife fixed it so he didn't have to. They say she was so used to looking after him and so fond of him that she was afraid he might get hurt in the nasty war. So he stayed home and pretended to produce essential foodstuffs while she went to the front herself! It's ironical when you think of it. She came back safe and sound from the Germans: it took one of her own people to kill her. . . ."

The Germans, I thought to myself, did not know Miranda as intimately as her own people did.

"I suppose Julian will inherit all her money," I mused, not really meaning anything pointed by the remark.

"I suppose so. . . ." The doctor was quicker than I to realise that our conversation had left those facts he admired so much for the realms of speculation—and sinister speculation at that. "You'd better ask Fergusson that kind of question. It's out of my province. Fergusson, or rather I should say Sheriff MacGuire. I understand Fergusson thinks the case is beyond him."

I nodded sadly. I thought it a shame that Pa should have been taken off the case; I didn't for a moment think it was beyond him.

"What's Sheriff MacGuire like?" I murmured absently.

"A politician—quite popular and reasonably honest. He hasn't any brains, of course."

And Voigt had begged MacGuire to take charge of the case personally! Assisted by Patrolman Jones. It was a curious way to indicate eagerness to have his daughter's murderer apprehended.

My mind reverted to a previous speculation. "Tell me," I said, "if you left El Paso at a quarter to twelve, could you possibly reach Palo Alto by one-thirty?"

Dr. Carter thought. "If you drove like hell," he nodded doubtfully, "you might just manage it."

"I see. . . ."

Julian could then have driven back again to El Paso, spent the remainder of the night there, and returned to Palo Alto late this morning, just as he actually had. I had never liked that "ideal couple" theory, and after Dr. Carter's sketch of the Rosses' married life I liked it even less.

We had called at two other adobe houses while we talked, and I saw that the clock on the doctor's dashboard said ten-past six. I'd had quite an afternoon out. The shadow of the hill behind the corral was pushing a dark shoulder over the left wing of the ranch-house as we drove up to the patio gates. I realised suddenly that it had become cool. I started thanking Dr. Carter mechanically for the extended "lift," and suggesting that he come in to

have a drink. My eyes sought in vain for our jalopy. Dagobert had said he'd be home in two hours. Not that I minded if he stayed out longer—he could stay in the Yucca Bar all night if he liked—but I did think it was only fair that he should warn me! I must say it was extremely inconsiderate.

I'd got this far when I realised I was reacting extraordinarily like Miranda. It was just the sort of thing I could imagine her saying to Julian. In fact, she'd said something very like it on the telephone last night.

... And had Julian obeyed her after all and *come back* and ...

Somebody jerked open the door for me. Dr. Carter had stopped the car and was saying thanks, but he had to rush. I nearly jumped out of my skin. The person who had opened the door for me was Julian Ross. A faint grin relieved the evenness of his features. It suggested irony rather than amusement. I wondered how I had ever thought of Julian Ross as insignificant.

"Deep in the mystery?" he said. "I hear, Mrs. Brown, you're very good at such things. We were wondering if you'd gotten lost."

I murmured something silly and the doctor drove off. Julian had not repeated my invitation to him about the drink. He watched the departing car for a moment and then turned to me.

"The Doc been telling you all about life in Palo Alto?" He smiled. "Carter prides himself on his professional discretion, but he's the biggest gossip in the State." He opened the gate for me. "I've just made a Martini," he said.

Unlike yesterday at this hour, the patio was not deserted. Voigt, Hal, and Peggy were there—the Karnaks were changing yet again—and I had the momentary sense of intruding on a family conclave. I must admit that everyone did his best to make me feel at home. There was an appropriately subdued atmosphere about the gathering, no one was boisterous or noisy. But the strains and stresses of yesterday were lacking. If there were emotional undercurrents I missed them. I had the feeling of a united family, only moderately bereaved.

Miranda's death had been like a release. After what I had heard this afternoon I began to understand why.

CHAPTER XVI

MIRANDA was dead, but her ghost was by no means laid. In the first place the police were still in the house. Statements by everybody had been taken down in writing. Inquests on both Miranda and Winthrop had already taken place, cause of death being established, and the police asking for an adjournment in both cases. At the moment statements were being taken from the servants.

I learned all this during my first Martini. Sheriff MacGuire might not have any brains, but he was getting some action. Bill McFarlan joined us, looking as though he had been through an ordeal. He had just made his statement.

"I guess it would look funny," Peggy said, "if we—that is, if any of us—went to the movies to-night."

Voigt refilled his glass. "Why not?" he said grimly. "They'll hang one of us, and it'll be something to do in the meanwhile. . . . How did you get on, McFarlan?"

Bill looked rueful and anxious. "I d-discovered the child's body," he reminded us. "And I was almost the last person to see M-Miranda alive."

"Almost, but not quite," Peggy put in roughly. "I saw her after you. Jeeze, can't we stop talking about it?"

I looked up at that moment and saw a huge, familiar figure outlined in the library door. For some reason I drew a breath of profound relief. It was Pa Fergusson.

Pa had shaved and was wearing a brand-new pair of levis with the price and specification marks still on them. His shirt, a bold black-and-red check, was also new, and he was wearing the most handsome black Stetson I'd ever seen. His Deputy-Sheriff's badge sparkled like a freshly minted coin; I could have sworn it too was brand new.

Pa had lost this morning air's of irritability and anxiety. Perhaps Dagobert's absence improved his temper. He was again the

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Pa had lost this morning air's of irritability and anxiety. Perhaps Dagobert's absence improved his temper. He was again the

affable Pa of the rocking-chair on the filling-station porch, slow and easy-going, who watched the world go by with detached but benevolent interest. He looked at us all with a kind of paternal watchfulness, tinged perhaps with faint pity, as though he were doing what he was doing for our sakes. His expression seemed to say: it hurts me more than it does you.

"I sure do hate to trouble you folks this way," he apologised, "pokin' around and askin' questions, but orders is orders." He turned a mild blue eye on Voigt, who had pointedly swung his back on him. "What Sheriff MacGuire tells me to do," he added regretfully, "I gotta do."

"I'll speak to MacGuire!" Voigt growled.

"They tell me," Pa drawled, "you spoke to him some on the telephone this morning. . . . He's a funny guy, MacGuire. He kinda hates to have people tell him how to run his business."

"Okay, I was a damn' fool," Voigt admitted. "But I only wanted the case put into competent hands."

"Sure, I know," Pa nodded sympathetically. "Me, too." He chuckled softly. "The darndedest part of it is that I was in his office at that very moment, handing in my resignation."

Peggy tactfully changed the subject. "Have a drink, Pa?"

"Thank you kindly, Miss Peggy," he answered, removing his black hat politely and revealing a new hair-cut. "But I guess I'd better not drink on duty. But don't mind me. You all go right ahead."

When murder has taken place and the murderer may be one of the company, it is not altogether easy to ignore the policeman in your midst. Peggy, with the tact she seemed to have acquired since her sister's death, made an attempt to treat Pa's presence as though it were the most natural thing in the world. She handed round cigarettes, and made Bismark the dachshund beg for stuffed olives. She said hello brightly when the Karnaks appeared and, assisted by Bill, hastened to give them drinks.

Sue, in the very dinner-frock I had envisaged during my wardrobe-brood this afternoon, sat down beside me and asked where Dagobert was. A desultory hum of chatter gave the impression of normality, but we were all really watching Pa. He

had strolled along the patio to the bench where Hal was sitting, a subdued Hal, very sober again, with a lost, bewildered look on his face which suggested he didn't quite know what it was all about. Pa eased himself down on the bench beside him. He put a heavy but affectionate arm around Hal's shoulders.

"Hal, boy," he said, lowering his voice, "there's a few things in that statement you made for me that don't add up." We were all of course listening now, but Pa seemed either not to notice or not to mind. "You say you got up at six this morning. You sure it wasn't five?"

"Maybe it was," Hal nodded. "Though I thought it was six. I slept pretty late. Maybe it was seven," he suggested suddenly.

This kind of thing must have made it an adventure to get a statement out of Hal Perkins. Pa remained unperturbed.

"You say you went out to the corral and met Winthrop, who told you Mrs. Ross had been stabbed to death," he continued. "Then you got a bottle of whisky and decided to knock it back. You didn't go near Mrs. Ross's bedroom either this morning or last night?"

"I don't think I did," Hal said doubtfully. "Maybe I chased Bismark out of Miranda's rose-garden. No, that was the other night. He was howling."

I admired Pa's patience. "Let me tell it the way I think it might be," he said gently. "You got up this morning at five, like you do every day of your life, Hal. You go out to the corral, and suddenly you hear Bismark howling in the rose-garden. You go in to chase him out. You go up to the open french windows to see if Julian got back from El Paso. You look through and see that Mrs. Ross looks funny, unnatural. You go in the room because you're sort of scared, remembering how she told you there was going to be a murder."

Hal had followed this hypothetical reconstruction of his own movements with absorbed interest, mixed with growing wonder at the Sheriff's imaginative powers.

"Say, Pa," he interrupted, puzzled. "How did you know Miranda told me there was going to be a murder? I forgot to tell you that."

"I just knew," Pa said mysteriously.

The explanation seemed to satisfy Hal. "Oh!" he said. "Go on. What did I do next?"

"Next you saw she was knifed. You beat it, pronto, forgetting to draw the curtains after you. *Then* you went for that whisky bottle. Now isn't that the way it could of been?"

"It could of," Hal admitted. "Only——"—he hesitated, not liking to contradict his old friend flatly—"only I don't think I've ever been in Miranda's room in my whole life. I wouldn't have the nerve."

Voigt guffawed. "And MacGuire calls that hick mechanic a detective!" he remarked loudly and offensively to Dwight Karnak.

Peggy again staved off possible trouble between the two older men. "What made you so certain Hal had been in Miranda's room?" she asked Pa quickly.

Pa scratched his head with deliberation. "I guess there's no reason why you all can't know," he drawled. "It turns out one of them Bull Durham cigarettes Hal's always smokin' was found there this morning. He mightta dropped it sudden if he'd seen her lyin' there dead."

He shrugged with bland affability while he let this piece of information sink in. "And there's another thing I oughtta tell you, Miss Peggy, now I'm lettin' everybody know everything I know. That wristwatch of yours which you told me this morning you lost two or three days ago. I found it on your sister's bedside table. And you had it on last night when Larry took you out. Maybe some time you'd like to tell me more about that."

He rose and replaced his hat, handling it gingerly by the crown so as not to bend the brim. His voice remained friendly and amiable.

"You see, folks," he said, "I'm playing square and above-board with you. Maybe that's the wrong way to do. I ain't had much experience in this kind of thing. Not like Mrs. Brown here," he added, looking gravely at me, "who writes books all about psychology and such-like. I ain't got nothing up my sleeve, I ain't got no idea who done it except like the Coroner said:

a person unknown. Or," he added, regarding each of us speculatively in turn, "or *persons* unknown."

His studiously casual use of the plural sent a slight shiver through me. I was certain he had said it deliberately, and I fancied my sudden tension was shared by some of the others. I remembered the feeling I had had a while ago of a family conclave, of people united in a common . . . was it sorrow or conspiracy?

The moment's tension lasted for a shorter time than I have taken to describe it. Voigt made a sound, indignant and deprecatory, rather like the snort of a horse.

"The old windbag!" he said to Dwight. "What's he holding out on us now?"

The faintest flicker of amusement ruffled the stolidity of Pa's heavy face. But his voice was solemn when he spoke. "I guess I didn't quite speak the truth to you, Mr. Voigt," he confessed. "There *was* just one thing I was keeping back. I was keeping it back on account I thought you'd sleep easier to-night if I did. But I reckon it was wrong of me. . . . You know that glass of port wine which was found on Mrs. Ross's bedside table?"

"No, I do not know anything about any glass of port," Voigt contradicted.

"It wasn't touched," Pa continued imperturbably, "but we had its contents analysed just the same. Now here's a funny thing which maybe you can explain. Because I can't. Doc Carter tells me there was enough of some stuff called nembatal in that port wine to kill five healthy people. . . ."

Voigt choked suddenly over the dregs of his Martini. "What?" he spluttered, fighting for breath.

Pa, who had ambled up to the chair on which he sat, thumped him helpfully on the back.

"Keep your hands off me, damn it!" he managed to gasp.

"I figured it might puzzle you too," Pa said sympathetically. "What do you make of it? Do you reckon someone was trying to poison her?"

"I don't reckon anything," Voigt grumbled. "You're paid to do the reckoning."

"I reckon someone was trying to poison her," Pa nodded thoughtfully. "I wish you could tell me something about that glass."

Voigt struggled to his feet, pushing past the bulky obstruction of Pa's body and making for the cocktail shaker.

"I told you," he said, "I don't know anything about any glass. Are you deaf? Damn it, must a man be bullied in his own house?"

"Pa's not trying to bully you, Dad," Peggy soothed. "He's only doing his duty. . . . Miranda often took nembutal and a glass of port when she couldn't go to sleep."

"In fact, that's the name of the stuff she gave me for my headache," Sue confirmed. "She *might* have put a bit too much into her own glass."

"Enough to kill five men?" Bill said briefly.

"But Miranda *wasn't* poisoned," Hal reminded us simply. "She was stabbed."

Pa had ignored the rest of us. He had followed Voigt over to the cocktail shaker, like a big St. Bernard tagging along after its master. With ponderous persistence he again addressed Voigt.

"I sure wish you'd try to remember about that glass," he said.

I thought Voigt was going to explode. But he controlled himself. His black, bushy eyebrows knit stormily, but no thunderbolt fell. He said with venomous patience:

"I have explained at some length, *Deputy-Sheriff* Fergusson, that I have never before this moment even heard of any glass on my daughter's bedside table, any glass, tumbler, or goblet, filled with port or poison. Have you finally got that into your thick skull? If you haven't, put it down in writing, and I'll sign it for you."

Pa listened to this speech with a look of genuine distress, punctuating it once or twice by anxious shakes of the head.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Voigt," he advised seriously. "Not in writing—honestly, I wouldn't. Because, you see, that glass was covered with your finger-prints."

CHAPTER XVII

I SHALL not try to analyse the psychological situation at dinner that evening. There certainly must have been one; for each of us was aware of the possibility that his neighbour was a murderer. Such a thought is so remote from everyday experience that none of us was able—even by trying—to sustain it for more than a fleeting second. People who pass you the salt and pepper are not murderers.

There was, I fancied, a significant moment just as we sat down. Miranda's chair at the head of the table faced us in mute reproach. I thought for a second it was going to be left empty as it had been last night. I am almost certain that Julian automatically began to take his usual place at the foot of the table; but he reconsidered, and with firm step came up to Miranda's chair, claiming it as rightfully his own. With my novelist's mind working in professional grooves, I decided that the moment was symbolic.

Maria had tactfully removed Winthrop's chair from the room. None of us thought of Winthrop. There are certain black cavities of the mind that a merciful consciousness seldom illuminates. Miranda's death we could all just bear to remember. The child's death—with its brutal meaninglessness and the sombre query it posed between accident and design—was too much for even the toughest of us. If it threatened to engulf our minds, we clung like shipwrecked sailors to the driftwood of the accident theory. At least, I imagine we all did. All of us, that is, except one.

During dinner we manufactured conversation with a fair degree of success. I found myself holding forth at length on such subjects as rationing in Britain, and Sue was entertainingly malicious about Hollywood. Julian reported rising cattle prices. Peggy and Bill quarrelled, and Hal watched over us all with a faintly worried, faintly pleased expression, as though he were personally responsible for our welfare.

Voigt said to Peggy with complacence: "Rotten dinner, Peg. You never could cook; neither could your mother. Still, she could do other things. . . ."

It was the first time I'd ever heard old Voigt mention his wife.

"How about some port?" he suggested. And stopped suddenly at the word port. Miranda's ghost was still not laid. "Or—or," he stammered on, "perhaps brandy or liqueurs."

By common consent we all had liqueurs. We had them on the patio. Peggy actually begged Dwight to play the piano. He played us some of the more maudlin passages from his forthcoming musical "Alabama." Sue glanced at me.

"You are listening," she said with her short, humourless laugh, "to our new Elizabethan Manor House on Sunset Boulevard. It will have two private swimming-pools."

I smiled blankly. It would be a little too smug of me to sympathise with Sue for a future in which there were two swimming-pools, and yet, as I met her eyes, I felt sorry for her.

We both knew that Dwight Karnak would never again write a promising but unsaleable string quartet. We both knew that Miranda had died too late. . . .

I looked at Bill McFarlan, wondering if he were dreaming of Lever & Gimbles, of soap and fifteen thousand a year.

I also wondered what Dagobert was up to. Not, I must admit, for the first time. The generally accepted theory—and one which had much precedence to recommend it—was that our jalopy had broken down. Julian had offered several times to drive into Alamogordo to look for him.

There is something singularly depressing about a happily married woman on her own. Men are kind to her. They offer her chairs, hasten to refill her coffee cup, and try to bring her into the conversation. But they do these things, you feel, out of a sense of duty. They take over during the temporary absence of her husband, not for the sheer love of service, but because they have been trained to befriend women in distress. They know there's no future in it.

Julian, I realised, would much rather have taken the car and gone to look for Dagobert, perhaps having a quick one at the

Yucca Bar on the way, than to have sat on the patio telling me about the menace of foot-and-mouth disease. Bill and Peggy were probably longing to go to the movies, except that they felt they had to ask me to come with them. Even Hal, urging more coffee and Cointreau on me, was muttering something about the horses.

I began to feel sorry for myself. Doubtless he found the conversation of horses more stimulating than my own.

And why shouldn't he, I thought irritably? Horses don't feel sorry for themselves, they do not sweat and whine about their condition, they do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins. Yes, I think I could turn and live with animals; they are so much nicer than Walt Whitman.

"England?" I murmured aloud, realising that Mr. Voigt was now doing his bit. "She'll pull through," I explained modestly. "She'll muddle through somehow, as she always has."

If that's the best you can do, I reflected savagely, just keep quiet. Don't say anything. Don't display the paucity of your intellect. Back in the good old days—when you were not a deserted wife—you were never at a loss. What will Jane Hamish say next? people used to ask. Now they tolerate Mrs. Brown because her husband's so delightful. You're becoming nothing but Dagobert's pale shadow.

When I was very young, people used to cultivate me for my own sake. But I am no longer young. I shall be twenty-nine again on my next birthday. Then exciting young men would ring me up and make exciting proposals. Now people tell me about foot-and-mouth disease.

I listened objectively for a moment to the sound of our voices—I seemed to be saying something about the weather again. The immemorial murmuring of innumerable bores, I thought, and wished I could work it into the conversation.

I hate to admit it, but I was badly missing Dagobert. I was exemplifying in its lowest form that wretched wormlike creature—the happily married woman without her husband.

We were talking vaguely about bridge by this time. Karnaks, Julian, and Voigt all admitted they played. But about poor Mrs. Brown?

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ORDER BEGINS AT HOME
Isn't bridge the one where you have five cards and draw from the pack?" I asked. "Or is that pinochle?"
After that they pressed me less eagerly to join them. I announced that I "simply had" to write some letters home and would they "forgive" me if I retired to my room. I thought they forgave me with alacrity, but then, I was still in my downtrodden mood. I felt like a depressed minority of one.

Writing letters home was not, I reflected as I crossed the patio towards our room, such a bad idea. There was Mother. There were all those people to whom I had sent postcards of the Empire State Building, promising to write fully by the next post, and at least three aunts who were convinced I'd be immediately kidnapped in America by gangsters. I would say we were staying in a delightful old-fashioned ranch, just like the movies. I would tell them about the weather and the sunsets. My letters would be as entertaining as my recent conversation.

As I was feeling for the light switch in my room, a car drew in front of the house. At the sound I snapped to at once, understanding what had been wrong with me. I had been making a determined effort not to think of Miranda and Winthrop the suppressed, underlying horror of their deaths had oozed the surface in the form of ill-humour and general depression. I heard the horn. *Toot-tootle-toot-toot. Toot-toot.* I shivered.

This was where Larry had come in last night. It wasn't the crimson Chrysler. It was Pa Fergusson's shabby Ford coupé. Nevertheless, it was Larry who crawled it and slouched towards the entrance arch. Though his face thrust nonchalantly into his pockets, the glimpse I got of his face suggested determination. He looked as though he were on business, not to make a social call.

As he crossed the patio, I lingered in my doorway wondering what necessity had made him endure the humiliation of his father's old car. He spoke to Julian, who rose from the table set up on the portal. I couldn't hear what he said. A moment later Julian went into the house and Larry followed. The library door closed. Voigt and the Karnaks looked at Julian with the predatory look of three bridge players.

deprived of their fourth. I ducked hastily into my room, for fear they might see me and decide to make the best of a bad job.

Now what had I been thinking of? Letters home, of course. I rummaged through Dagobert's brief-case, and found among Mexican travel folders and books on Mediæval Metrical Romances some air-mail stationery. I opened the typewriter and began briskly.

"Dear Mother," I wrote. I stared at the words intently for a moment, then put in a new sheet of paper and wrote: "Dearest Mother."

I contemplated this opening for awhile, and cleaned the 'e' and 'a' of my typewriter with the pin of my brooch. I tore out the sheet and inserted a third. At the top of it I wrote in capital letters:

MURDER OF MIRANDA ROSS. And in three neat columns underneath I typed the headings: PERSONS—MOTIVES—ALIBIS. I started with Mr. Voigt.

1. Mr. Voigt. *Motive*: Miranda was directly instrumental in breaking up his marriage. Indirectly she could be held responsible for Margaret Voigt's suicide. *Alibi*: He was drunk and asleep all night. *Comment*: But he heard Peggy in Miranda's room. Quarrelling? At 12.5? Or later? *Query*: How about the poisoned port with his finger-prints? Did he try to poison her, not succeed, and have to stab her? If so, why carefully remove finger-prints from knife and leave them on the port glass? *Additional query*: Why was he so keen to get Pa Fergusson off the job?

2. Peggy Voigt. *Motive*: Miranda had pinched her young man. Miranda had successfully bust up at least two previous romances. *Alibi*: None. *Comment*: Why did she lie to Fergusson about the watch? How did the crystal get smashed? You could smash a watch crystal by such a violent gesture as driving a knife into someone's heart. *Query*: Does this mean the murder took place at half-past one?

3. Hal Perkins. *Motive*: No very clear motive. *Alibi*: None. *Comment*: A cigarette butt, almost certainly his, was found on the scene of the crime. But would Hal leave a cigarette butt on all places in Miranda's room? Remember how meticulously he

gathered up his cigarette butts yesterday when he was in our room! (I felt pleased with this point and underlined it.) *Additional comment:* Hal told us Miranda expected murder to take place. Why did she? (I got immensely excited at this point, and typed my next comment in capital letters.) BUT DID SHE SAY IT? WE HAVE ONLY HAL'S WORD FOR IT!

4. Julian Ross. *Motive:* Without going into sound but very human reasons, Julian has the simple, universal motive of money. His wife was a millionairess. *Alibi:* He was in El Paso at 11.45. But he could just have made Palo Alto by 1.30, the hour at which (???) Miranda was killed. *Comment:* Julian's mother "up and died" shortly after Miranda came to live at Palo Alto. Could Miranda not be blamed for this, at least in Julian's imagination? And could this point be added to the intangible motives omitted above? *Query:* Yesterday when we arrived and Julian was just off to El Paso, he ran back into the house for a "moment"—his word. He stayed over half an hour. Why? A discreet word to the servants might elicit an answer to this.

Candidates 1, 2, 3, and 4 above are all members of Miranda's family, and had good reasons to tire of her "perfection." Keep in mind possibility—hinted at by Pa Fergusson himself—of two or more of them being involved. Murder was committed by person or persons unknown!

5. Sue Karnak. *Motive:* Miranda turned the Karnaks from carefree Bohemians into Hollywood celebrities. On the surface this seems an odd motive for vengeance, but Sue may have felt it deeply when she contrasted the happiness of their Greenwich Village days with their worldly success of the present, and realised that Dwight's genius had been wasted. Also would it not be humiliating to owe everything to an outsider? *Additional motive:* Was she plain, old-fashioned jealous of Miranda? She must have been. Even I was. But she was confident Miranda never had a love-affair in her life. *Alibi:* She took nembutal and was asleep from about half-past eleven onwards. *Comment:* I hate this kind of alibi. How do we know she took nembutal? Miranda herself told Dagobert on the telephone that she had left Sue asleep, but Miranda cannot be cross-examined. Dwight said Sue was asleep

at twelve with her mouth open, but Dwight is her husband. . . .

6. Dwight Karnak. *Motive*: Same as Sue's. *Additional motive*: He was infatuated with Miranda—remember his original telephone call to her?—and must have been piqued at finding Bill McFarlan at Palo Alto. He discovered Bill coming out of Miranda's room at midnight. *Comment*: Bill's presence at Palo Alto probably explains Miranda's reluctance to invite the Karnaks. Few women like to cope with two admirers simultaneously. *Alibi*: Between midnight and three o'clock Dwight played the piano. *Comment*: Bill admits he heard this rather unconvincing nocturnal concert, but was Dwight *continuously* at the piano? *Note*: Dwight has a murderous temper.

7. Bill McFarlan. *Motive*: Jealousy of Dwight? Disillusion with Miranda? After that fight in the garden with Dwight, he must have started thinking. *Alibi*: None. *Comment*: Remind Peggy that Bonwit Teller frock Miranda bought her is hideously—and intentionally?—unbecoming!

That finished the members of the household, except for Dagobert and myself, and I was beginning to feel discouraged. I had started out hopefully, feeling that if I put down the bare facts in an orderly way all I had to do was read them over a couple of times and arrive logically at the answer.

I read them over about seven times. I arrived at about seven different answers. The eighth answer I got—and one which nearly made me tear my notes up—was that none of the above seven was the murderer. In a mood of despair I added:

8. Larry Fergusson. *Motive*: According to Yolanda he was "scared as hell" of Miranda. *Alibi*: Presumably he drove home again after delivering Peggy at Palo Alto around 11.30. *Comment*: What is Larry saying to Julian in the library at this very moment? Why don't you find out instead of fiddling around here?

9. Yolanda Hernandez Fergusson. *Motive*—? *Alibi*—? *Comment*—? She disliked Miranda intensely, but then so did I. *Query*: What—if anything—has the fact that Yolanda was Winthrop's mother got to do with it? Why introduce Winthrop's death into the above muddle? His death could have been accidental. (I re read this sentence, crossed out the "could have been" and substi

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tuted "was." But it didn't make me feel any better.) I added a kind of general footnote:
10. Of the above nine persons, all except Julian, Larry, and Yolanda, heard Winthrop say he knew who killed Miranda. A push him into the well. *Important query:* When Julian came back from El Paso at eleven o'clock this morning, did anyone tell him what Winthrop had said?

That exhausted me. I put my typewriter away and arranged my notes neatly on the top of Dagobert's bureau. He could study them when he came home. I, meanwhile, should go to bed and to sleep, thus proving my total indifference as to whether he stayed out all night or not. I sat down on the edge of the bed and took off my shoes.

What had happened to Larry Fergusson's new car? I stifled a yawn and removed a stocking. It was odd there had been no sound of a car outside in the last half-hour. Peggy and Bill must have decided against the movies and Larry must still be "visiting." Naturally I couldn't expect Dagobert until the pubs closed. Or did they close in America?

I yawned again and took off my wristwatch. It said twenty past eight. I shook it, but it was going. Dagobert's travelling clock told exactly the same story. It was only twenty past eight! This was absurd. I stopped yawning at once and realised I'd never felt so sleepy. One of the few things I object to in America is the horrible habit of dining in the late afternoon. It makes for interminably long evenings with nothing to do except go to bed or out and look for trouble. I put on my shoes and decided to go out and look for trouble. I put on my shoes and into the patio. The Karnaks and Voigt had roped Hal into a bridge game, and I paused beside the table only long enough to see why one of the hands lay exposed, so that poor Dwight seemed to be getting a game. They explained about "dummy."

I felt reasonably safe from bridge for the remainder of our something about wanting a book and strolled towards the

library. As a law clerk in Kensington, I had had considerable experience in barging innocently in upon the senior partner while he was closeted with a client who had overstayed his—or usually her—welcome. Whether Larry had overstayed his welcome with Julian I had no way of knowing, but I hoped to break in upon them with my practised and convincing mixture of surprise, confusion, and apology.

I did the confusion part only too easily. In fact, as I turned the doorknob my heart was in my mouth. I don't quite know what I expected to find on the other side of that door, but as I pushed it irresolutely open I wished fervently that I had gone to bed.

My panic was only momentary. There was no surprise, and I passed at once to the apology. Larry and Julian glanced up at my entrance and Julian scrambled politely to his feet.

"I'm so sorry," I murmured, "I didn't know anyone was here. I was looking for a book."

Larry, not bothering to rise from the deep arm-chair in which he was sprawled, glanced doubtfully from me to Julian, and then back at me again. I realised I was wearing only one stocking. Julian's smile was guarded. I thought he was slightly flushed. Both men, in fact, gave me an impression of sudden constraint, as though I had interrupted a dispute.

"I'm afraid there's nothing in this library which you'd find very amusing," Julian said. "They're mostly technical books."

I smiled brightly. "But I love technical books. Now what was that one called I was glancing through this morning?" I started towards the bookcase in the far corner of the room behind the desk.

I thought that Larry too started, but it may have been my imagination. I rested one hand on the edge of the desk, kneeling and with the other hand groped for a book on the bottom shelf. I was horribly aware that Julian had come up behind me. Unless he was deaf he must have heard my heart pounding.

"Can I help you?"

I answered between teeth that were chattering. "Thanks. This is it."

I rose, clutching a volume I later discovered was called *Differentiation of Transcendental Functions*.

When I rose I saw, without actually looking again in that direction, that Julian had put his hand over the pink slip of paper which a moment before had lain face up on the centre of the desk.

But I still saw that pink slip as clearly as if my eyes had photographed it. It was a cheque. It was made out to Larry Fergusson. It was for the staggering sum of three thousand dollars.

And it was signed Miranda Ross.

CHAPTER XVIII

I ONCE owned a book called *How to Write a Play*. Indeed, I once nearly wrote a play. It was about a sculptor who smashed up his own masterpiece—a nude of the woman he loved—with a meat axe. I don't remember quite why, but I've often felt the same way. I gave the first Act of this tense drama to Dagobert to read. He lost it on top of a bus, but the next day he gave me this book called *How to Write a Play*. It particularly stressed the technical difficulties of getting characters off the stage. They had to have something known as an "exit line." They must not wander off aimlessly or suddenly bolt.

In a play this is doubtless sound. In life these things are sometimes managed less neatly. I bolted from the library clutching the *Differentiation of Transcendental Functions* without the least technical skill. My exit line went something like: "Er—ah—er—thanks—er——"

I collided with Mr. Voigt, who was coming into the house. He examined me from under bushy black eyebrows.

"What's the matter?" he grunted. "Look as though you'd seen a ghost."

I made vague deprecatory sounds which were intended to convey that this was my normal way of emerging from libraries, and thought: *Have I seen a ghost? Do ghosts write cheques?*

For Miranda's cheque was dated the 24th of September—to-day!

The ghost-theme seemed to have caught Voigt's imagination. He muttered: "She *could* do it, at that. In fact, it's to be expected. She never left us alone when she was alive. Why now? I'm going to have a drink."

I dumbly said nothing, and he continued to stare at me, or perhaps it was through me. No, his eyes were not humorous, or even, as I once described them, malicious. They were haunted.

"I'm going to have a drink!" he repeated on a rising note. It was the querulous inflexion, not of a man who has been drinking,

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but of a man who has been restraining his thirst. "A drink. A no one's going to stop me. No one's going to say: 'Miranda says you can't have a cocktail,' or 'No, you don't!' God damn it, don't you realise it! Miranda's dead."

"I realise it," I nodded uncomfortably, "but do you?"

He started. "What's that? Me? . . . I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brown." He was abjectly apologetic all at once. "All this business. Upset me. I—uh—not myself, you know." He gestured vaguely. "Unexpected. Blow and all that. Damn-fool deputy-sheriffs poking around. Why don't you take a hand at the bridge table?"

I nodded again and edged towards the patio. I heard him shuffle deeper into the dining-room towards the liquor cabinet. He was still muttering to himself. "Dead, dead," he kept saying. Was it to reassure himself?

"Dead. . . . But she is, too. *She* is, too." His voice quavered and I could barely hear the gruff whisper. "Why couldn't you wait—just a few days longer?"

I came out into the patio hastily, feeling guilty and mean. Yesterday Mr. Voigt's disjointed allusions had been meaningless; after my talk with Dr. Carter it was not hard to identify the nameless "she" of his tortured mental vagaries. *She* was the expensive Follies beauty who had taken an overdose of veronal in cheap Dallas boarding-house last week. *She* was Miranda's own mother. I felt slightly sick at the thought. *She* was Miranda's own Peggy and Bill had joined the bridge players, and were resisting pressure from the Karnaks to take Voigt's hand. They seized on me to clinch their argument.

"You want to go to the movies, don't you, Jane?" Peggy led. "It's Danny Kaye." "It's already so funny," I said harshly, "I can't think why I should go out of their way to make themselves laugh." I myself together. "I'd love to see Danny Kaye. That is, if I still giving midnight performances in Alamogordo." "And the last feature not nine yet," she reminded me. "And the last feature begin till nine-thirty. We've been over to your room, or you."

I felt touched. "Let's go," I said. "Shouldn't I put on my other stocking?"

"No one will look at you," Peggy pointed out with the unrefreshing candour of youth.

She herself was looking relatively civilised in a tweed skirt and the light-green cardigan she had lent to Sue last night.

We went, leaving the bridge players in a state of frustration. In the garage Peggy climbed into Julian's sedan.

"I'll drive," Bill said, following her.

"Like hell you will!" Peggy replied, pushing him over. "You may be good at atoms, but you drive like a drunken Mexican."

"Some men, of course, like masterful women," I remarked. "I once tried it with Dagobert, and didn't see him again for a week."

Peggy flushed. I thought for a moment she was going to tell me to go to hell, but instead she crawled over.

"Okay," she said. "Bill drives. I'm insured."

"Now that little point's settled," I said, "you don't really have to take me with you, you know. How does the phrase run: two's company . . ."

"Three may be a crowd," Peggy said, "but two can be a damn nuisance."

"I am not," Bill remarked dryly and with more spirit than I thought he had, "I am not L-Larry Fergusson."

"Jeeze! I'll say you're not!" Peggy exclaimed. And added more gently: "Thank God. . . . Jump in, Jane. We'll be late."

She grabbed me by the arm and dragged me on to the front seat beside her.

Bill backed the car out of the garage, in the process removing a hinge from the garage door. I was surprised and relieved when Peggy made no comment. During our journey down the Palo Alto road I saw what Peggy had meant. Bill had a way of driving with extreme caution along the smooth bits of road and of speeding up for bumps and corners. At any rate, it took my mind off other things.

We reached the junction with the main highway and turned right towards Alamogordo. Pa's Place, on the corner, seemed to be closed up. There was not even a light burning in it.

I asked suddenly: "How much does a Chrysler like Larry's cost?"

"About three thousand dollars," Bill said.

"That's what I thought," I murmured.

Neither of them questioned my interest in the cost of Chryslers. We were thinking along different lines.

"How do you know so much about it?" Peggy asked Bill.

"As a m-matter of fact," Bill said, "I was thinking of b-buying a Chrysler."

"With what?" Peggy said.

"Well, if I take that new job, we could, I could——"

"You're *not* taking it! And for heaven's sake watch the road!"

Neither of them spoke for awhile. I had the feeling that this subject had arisen between them before.

"Look, Jane," Peggy finally said. "This big heel, though he doesn't look it, is supposed to be reasonably intelligent about such things as neutrons and protons—whatever they are. They're his passion in life and the only things he knows anything about. And yet he says he's going to some filthy place like Chicago and make soap! Tell him not to be such a nitwit."

"Don't be such a nitwit, Bill," I echoed obediently.

"If you two are going to gang up on me," Bill protested.

"Talk it over with Sue Karnak some time," I advised seriously.

"What's she got to do with it?" Peggy said.

"The Karnaks decided to get rich instead of doing what they wanted. Ask them about it, Bill."

Bill scowled thoughtfully. "Yes, Dwight told me something about it once," he admitted reluctantly. "This morning, as a matter of . . ."

"Am I old enough to be told what this is all about?" Peggy interrupted.

"Dwight thinks," Bill explained dubiously, "he would have been a great composer if he hadn't been ruined by, by——"

"Miranda?" I suggested quietly.

"By making so much money," Bill concluded quickly. He went on with increasing effort: "As far as I'm concerned, it isn't only

the money. . . . It's that I think I ought . . . I *know* I ought—to—to——"

He glanced past Peggy towards me, as though appealing for moral support. I looked blank and said nothing. Beside me on the seat I felt Peggy's body stiffen. She prompted in a whisper:

"To what, Bill?"

Bill stared again at the road in front of us. This might have had certain advantages, but I had a feeling he wasn't seeing it. Peggy too was staring straight ahead. I could see her profile in the dim light of the dashboard lamp—that profile which was such a plain, roughly cast version of Miranda's. The engine purred steadily. Above its sound Peggy's voice suddenly rose, edgy, sharp, with a quality of brittleness I had never heard in it before.

"To what?" she insisted.

The coldness of Bill's voice was almost a relief. "I know," he explained quietly, "that I ought to take the Lever and Gimble job because—well, because M-Miranda would have wished me to."

Had Peggy all along been waiting for this answer? I think she had. For she took it like a blow foreseen and inevitable. I felt her shoulder, which had been hard and rigid, relax. It was the relaxation, not of relief, but of defeat. Her voice was dull and toneless, the voice of something inhuman and unreal.

"But Miranda is dead," it said. "She's dead, Bill. Don't you understand that?"

Bill said nothing. He continued to stare at the road ahead. I suddenly wanted to shake him.

In the glare of an oncoming car Peggy's face was white. Her eyes were glazed—glazed like those open, staring eyes I had seen at six o'clock this morning. They were Miranda's own eyes.

The illusion was fleeting, but I think I acquired a few grey hairs during that second. I thought the throbbing of the engine had become intolerably strident suddenly, as though we had begun to race forward into the white pencil of light which the highway cut through the surrounding darkness. Peggy's voice again broke through the sound. It rose with the scream of the motor. Though it was edged with hysteria, it was at least human. It jangled on my nerves, but it no longer left me frozen with horror.

"Can't you understand it, Bill?" she said. "Bill, you've got to understand it! Miranda is dead. . . . Miranda has nothing more to do with you—with me—with any of us. . . . Nothing, Bill. Nothing!"

Bill's hands continued to grasp the steering-wheel firmly and with utter concentration; he might not have heard. Peggy's voice cracked suddenly.

"Oh, for God's sake, Bill!" she pleaded. "Say something."

Bill said: "You hated Miranda, didn't you, Peggy?"

The words seemed to snuff out the hysteria which had flamed up. It was Peggy's turn to say nothing.

"You wanted Miranda to be dead, didn't you?" Bill added.

Her head was now bowed so that I couldn't see her face. I think she had begun silently to cry. Her voice was small and bewildered.

"I tried so hard," she said. "I wanted so terribly much—to love her. . . . But. . . . Yes, Bill, I hated her. I wanted her dead. . . ."

We went to the cinema. That's where we'd set out to go, and no one felt capable of making any alternative suggestion. Bill didn't speak another word until we reached Alamogordo. Then, as he handed us our tickets and we went into the theatre, he said to Peggy: "Do you mind if I sit by myself?"

He sat a few rows in front of us. We could just make out the back of his head. I think Peggy spent more time watching that dark, relentless shape than she did looking at the screen. I, too, would hate to have to give a résumé of what was—to judge by its reception by the Friday-night Alamogordo crowd—an excruciatingly funny picture.

I tried to get the harrowing incident in the car into perspective. One thing I must not do. I must not become involved in the private emotions of individuals at Palo Alto. If I happened to feel intensely sorry for Peggy, that was no reason for not observing that she hated Miranda; my sympathy must not explain away her wristwatch found in Miranda's room, nor the lies she had told about it. I must keep cool and aloof. I must think of essentials: times, alibis, facts. Personal feelings must not affect me.

I could have cheerfully knifed Miranda myself!

I concentrated on Danny Kaye for awhile. At the end of ten

minutes I caught myself on the verge of smiling. The human mind—of which mine is probably an example—is poor at steady application.

Essentials: Miranda was dead. Everyone at Palo Alto kept saying so. *Facts:* Miranda's cheque to Larry for a sum which would have paid for the new Chrysler was dated to-day. Miranda hadn't been alive to-day.

I squirmed uncomfortably, remembering Mr. Voigt and his ghost. Then I laughed briefly and bitterly at myself. The explanation was so simple that it would take a twisted brain like my own to have looked for any other.

Miranda had simply dated the cheque a day ahead. That was all. As obvious as that. Thank the Lord I'd realised it before seeing Dagobert!

Why had she dated it a day ahead? She'd forgotten what day it was. I've done it a hundred times myself and sometimes even got the month wrong.

The rest was easy. Larry had taken the cheque to the bank this morning, and because of Miranda's death, payment had been refused. That was why Dagobert and I had found him so gloomy at lunch-time. To-night he'd come up to Palo Alto to see Julian about it. Hence the long session in the library.

It was all quite simple—all except why Miranda was handing out cheques for three thousand dollars to Larry Fergusson. All, except why Julian didn't throw him out of the house. All, except . . .

The thing for me to do was to enjoy the film; it was designed for persons of my mentality. I tried. Other morons like myself all around me seemed to be succeeding.

Someone behind me and to the left was especially appreciative. I had dimly been aware of that laugh for ten or fifteen minutes, not distinctly, but only as one merging element in the general hullabaloo. Now all at once it stood out in sharp relief, like a familiar name uttered suddenly in a crowded street.

Only Dagobert laughed like that.

I turned round and waved, half rising in my seat. He didn't see me, but the woman in the seat behind did, and told me.

down. I obeyed, allowing first impulses to give way to second thoughts. My first feeling had been of unmingled relief; I mingled it immediately. The truth was I had been more worried about Dagobert than I'd admitted to myself. Finding him safe and obviously sound, I felt in quick succession relieved, foolish, and finally annoyed. In the same way anxious parents will wildly caress a child who has narrowly escaped being run over by a truck and then give it a thrashing.

I worked it off in a little swift imaginary dialogue. I was overjoyed, I told him, that he was in such high spirits and appreciating the film. At Palo Alto there was the small matter of a couple of brutal murders to be cleared up, but doubtless that could wait. After all, one must keep abreast with the latest movies. Of course, having said that one would be home in two hours, it might have been considerate to have got in touch somehow. New Mexico is a primitive community, but I understand they have the telephone here now.

I felt a bit better after this and glanced round again, guided by the sound of Dagobert's happy laughter. I made out the shape of his head eventually. He generally insists on sitting in the cheapest seats near the screen, but he was sitting in the back row now for some reason. This puzzled me for a moment, then ceased to puzzle me.

Beside him Yolanda contentedly sat—or rather snuggled. Whether or not they were holding hands I had too much dignity to try to discern. Besides, it was too dark. She too, I am sorry to say, was enjoying the film.

I wasn't.

I stood up, ignoring the protest of the woman behind and leaned for a second over Peggy.

"I'm going," I whispered. "Pick me up in the Yucca Bar when you've had enough."

I took the far aisle to avoid passing near Dagobert and Yolanda. I didn't want to embarrass them. I shouldn't have minded dropping a small high-explosive bomb in their laps, but I didn't want to embarrass them.

I thought how much more pleasant it was out in the village

main street than in the stuffy cinema with louts laughing and making passes at Mexican wenches. The air was cool and only faintly perfumed by the exhausts of passing vans and lorries. Above, the stars were crystal clear, and almost as near as the red, green, and orange neon signs which outlined the street in a Broadway blaze of advertising.

I glanced down the line of parked cars outside the cinema. Our jalopy stood out from the row like a bad tooth. I strolled towards it and, stooping in the gutter, let out the air from the two back tyres. Then I took the folding handle of the jack and walked across the street to the Yucca Bar.

CHAPTER XIX

I AM not the jealous type. Apart from wanting to strangle Dagobert, I bore him absolutely no ill-will. I *had* hoped *my* husband wouldn't go native, but it was only fair to remember that all my girl friends had warned me Dagobert was the unstable type.

Now that I thought of it, *how did they know?*

The thing to do was to keep quite calm, to dismiss the whole silly incident from my mind. When he came in to-night—if he did come in to-night—I should not even bother to mention it.

Having come calmly to this decision, I continued across the street where a neon sign, alternately red and blue, said YUCCA BAR. I thought of other things, such as, could I get back that job I used to have with my firm of solicitors in Kensington? A truck nearly ran over me, but I ignored the driver's profanity. Dagobert would have felt rather foolish coming out of the cinema with Yolanda on his arm to find me stretched out on the asphalt, just another road casualty. Thank heavens I hadn't written that letter home to Mother, saying how delightful everything was. Poor Mother—it would upset her terribly when she heard about it. She adored Dagobert. Poor Mother. . . .

I found myself sniffing at the thought of how wretched poor Mother would be.

I pushed open the door of the Yucca Bar and, still clutching the jack handle, walked in.

It was an oblong room, with a bar along one side and, along the other, tables set in booths. At the end stood the juke-box, the dominating feature of the room, with its neon tubes of rainbow colours flowing and merging into each other, the while caressing voices in closest harmony nasally intoned: "It's you I'm dreamin' of, it's you I gotta love."

On the walls there was a stag's head and big framed pictures of President Lincoln, Custer's Last Stand, and a South Sea Island entitled Join the Navy. Signs over two doors—guys and

GALS—lent an air of bonhomie to what I guessed must be the lavatories.

In spite of the latter sign, I seemed to be the only woman in the place. I retired modestly to one of the empty booths and waited for a good twenty minutes before anyone paid any attention to me. I stared fixedly at the cover of my menu, which said "Yucca Bar—Famous for its Service," and thought about practically nothing at all.

The stools at the bar were crowded with men in levis and cowboy hats. Everybody seemed to be having a grand time, everyone except the lonely Englishwoman, so many miles from home, so abandoned and so thirsty. Occasionally someone turned round and scrutinised me, but it never led to anything.

At the far end of the bar someone was shouting drinks all round, unhappily overlooking me. I caught sight of his wide beige sombrero and the red-and-yellow check silk shirt which covered a broad tapering back. A man of substance obviously—everyone roared at everything he said.

Finally he swaggered off, slapping backs all round. As his big silver spurs jangled past my table, I ducked back suddenly against the wall of the booth.

My man of substance was Larry Fergusson.

He didn't see me as he strolled complacently out of the bar, and the first delightful thought that struck me was that he might run into his wife and Dagobert coming out of the cinema. *Maybe there would be an incident. The thought cheered me up.* I would be very gentle and tactful as I nursed Dagobert back to health.

The assistant barman had finally come to inquire what errand had brought me to the Yucca Bar. I explained about a triple gin.

"Who's the handsome cowboy who just went out?" I asked.

"Him? A cowboy?" The barman grinned. "Larry Fergusson ain't never been on a horse in his life! He don't need to. He's got plenty of dough."

"I noticed he was pushing the boat out," I nodded, wondering if Julian had been amenable about the three thousand dollars, and why.

"Ma'am?" he inquired.

"Flashing it around."

"Yeh!" The man eyed me doubtfully. "He just come into some money. Distant relation died and left him some. Did you say a *triple gin*?"

He came back shortly to say that they didn't have triple gins, but would a double and a single do? Also did I know Yarmouth, where his brother had been stationed during the war?

I had finished my single gin and was working up to the double when Peggy came in. Two elderly Mexican labourers regarded this feminine invasion with disapproval and left. Peggy slumped down in the seat opposite me and asked me what I was drinking.

"The same for me," she told the barman, and when he had gone added: "Jeeze! If Miranda could see us sitting in this place!"

She flushed at the name and I changed the subject.

"The film finished?"

She shook her head. "I left—lost interest. . . . I told Bill to pick us up here."

She sniffed the single gin the barman brought and glanced at the double on the table.

"What's the chaser?" she asked, making conversation.

"Gin."

"Jane," she said, "that was a disgusting scene in the car."

I pushed a packet of cigarettes across to her. "If you want to talk about it, carry on."

"I don't," she admitted. "But I've got to."

For a moment or two she fiddled with the kitchen match she had taken out of her handbag, first picking her teeth with it and finally lighting it on her stubby thumbnail. Our booth was reasonably private for the purpose of conversation, and the juke-box, now inevitably playing "A Moonlit Verandah," covered our words.

"Sure you don't mind?" She laughed briefly. "Maybe you can put us all in a book some day—as Miranda suggested."

"Did she say that to you too?" I asked.

She nodded absently, while something vague and muddled stirred in the depths of my mind. Hal had made the same re-

mark. Even Dagobert had suggested it as the deciding reason Miranda had invited us to Palo Alto. Had I really been asked to Palo Alto because I wrote murder stories? Because Miranda wanted the tragic events which had since taken place there to be recorded?

It didn't make sense, but I had the exhilarating sensation of groping around the very centre of the enigma. I brought myself back with an effort to what Peggy was saying.

"Bill worshipped Miranda," she murmured, "He still does, damn it. He thinks he only admired and respected her, but really he was just plain physically in love with her." She jabbed out the cigarette she had just lighted on the marble table-top.

"Just plain sex!" she said savagely. "Sex! God, how I loathe that word. . . . I wouldn't dare say this to Bill. He thinks it was all on some higher plane. But it wasn't. Miranda saw that. He thinks she was an angel. But she wasn't. She was a fiend. . . . And another thing," she added in a whisper, "she was as mad as a March hare."

"Did you kill her?" I asked.

She pushed a strand of fair hair from her forehead and shook her head mechanically. "No, I didn't kill her, but I don't blame whoever did. . . . That sounds rotten, doesn't it?"

"It would sound rather peculiar if said on the witness stand," I said non-committally.

She frowned and bit her lower lip. She had started the evening with a modest application of lipstick, but that had long since vanished, and her mouth was almost without colour. She tried to find words to express what she meant.

"I mean, for *her* sake, in a way," she stammered. "It would have been an act of mercy, in a way."

"For whom?"

"For Miranda too." She drank down the double gin as though it were indeed only a chaser. "For everybody, I guess. I don't know what I mean exactly. Sometimes I feel almost sorry for Miranda. I think I do. Anyway, I try to. It's better than plain hating her. God knows she had her side of it too!"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, we may have loathed her, but she had plenty of reason to loathe all of us too. When you think of it. Jeeze, can't we get a drink around this joint?"

I made gestures at the bartender, who was observing us with disapproval. He walked to the end of the bar and served someone else.

"I mean, from her point of view we were a pretty lousy lot," Peggy said. "Julian, ineffective and lazy. Dad a drunkard. Hal a bit screwy. And me." She laughed harshly. "Well, look at me! Miranda tried to do something with us, I guess. Maybe she even loved us in her way. We were all she had—or so she kept saying. I always thought she loved us. That's what made us all feel like such skunks, not being able to recip, recip, cip—jeeze, I'm catching it from Bill."

I kicked her gently under the table. "The same again," I said to the bartender, who was leaning over us with patent dislike.

"We don't have no more triple gins," he said, making me feel strangely as though I were back in England.

"We'll settle for doubles," I said.

"No doubles."

"All right. Singles."

"I'll see," he grunted.

He walked back to the bar and took down a gin bottle from a row of unopened gin bottles, muttering to himself. We were obviously giving the Yucca Bar a bad name. I said to Peggy:

"You were saying she loved you all?"

"Yeah!" She cupped her forehead in her hands and leaned her elbows on the table. "Yeah, I always thought so. She never got mad at us, ever. She never lost her temper even. She was always as sweet as hell. She *was* a saint, I guess. It would take at least a saint to love us. . . . And she did—or rather I thought she did. Until last night."

"That'll be a dollar, lady," the barman said, returned with two single gins.

I paid, silently cursed him, and leaned towards Peggy.

"What happened last night to change your opinion?"

"It was that damn' wristwatch which really started it," she said,

little shamefaced suddenly. "It was dumb of me to tell Pa I hadn't seen it for several days when he was bound to find out eventually. I, well, I lost my temper last night when I went in to say good night."

"Was that what you went in to say?"

"No!" For a second a blaze of anger came into her eyes.

"No. I went in to tell her to lay the hell off Bill."

"What did she say?"

"She was sweet and patient as ever. 'Why, I'm old enough to be Bill's mother, my dear,' she said. 'Bill thinks of me as an older sister. I want to cultivate his confidence. I want him to like me, because some day he will be my own dear Peggy's husband.' She talked like that—the way she always did."

Peggy's jaw hardened. She took the cigarette I had put in the ashtray and puffed at it violently.

"But I wasn't having it!" she continued harshly. "I told her to lay off, that I saw through that maternal racket. She just smiled—kind of gentle and hurt. I must have been waving my arms around, because she suddenly said, probably to change the subject: 'Careful, dear, or you'll break your wristwatch.' 'Which you gave me!' I sneered. 'Just as you've given me everything else I have in the world.'"

Peggy stopped, flushing at the still vivid memory of that scene. I waited, saying nothing, knowing that having got this far she would have to finish.

"It was mean of me to say that, but I was mad as snakes," she went on jerkily. "I'm afraid it wasn't the first time I'd blown off like this. But before Miranda had always smoothened me down—been especially sweet and made me feel like a heel. Last night she didn't. I looked at her and saw she was white as a ghost. She was trembling and her eyes were hating me! I'd never seen her like that before, and it scared the wits out of me. It was as though all the bottled-up hate of years was escaping from her eyes of hers."

She shivered. "I can still see her eyes," she whispered. She shook herself with a visible effort. "Then Miranda said, 'Get out of here!' She didn't raise her voice, but it was like the roar of a

"I mean, we may have loathed her, but she had plenty of reason to loathe all of us too. When you think of it. Jeeze, can't we get a drink around this joint?"

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She shivered. "I can still see her eyes," she whispered. She shook herself with a visible effort. "Then Miranda said: 'Get out of here!' She didn't raise her voice, but it was like the hiss of a

ORDER BEGINS AT HOME

"Give me back that watch—and get out of here!"

"Miranda—*Miranda* talking like that! I couldn't believe it."

Jane! I—I—it sounds melodramatic. I guess it was. I was feeling melodramatic. I tore off the watch and flung it down on the table. The crystal broke. We both heard it. And something inside Miranda broke at the same time. This time she *did* raise her voice. She let me have it good and proper. She called me every unprintable name she could think of. Then she started on the others—Dad and Hal and Julian. She used words I never dreamed she even knew. Miranda, whom no one had ever heard so much as saying 'darn'! But it was worse than just foul words. It was the filth of her mind. She started on Mother. She screamed a lot about babies—how they were made. How disgusting it was. What people did. What *she'd* like to do. What she was going to do! Terrible things, Jane . . . horrible. I felt filthy and dirty all through. I ran out of the room. . . . But I can't forget those words, those poisonous sewer words."

She stared up at me abruptly, still gripping her temples as though to control the tempest which pounded in her brain. I was glad to see tears start into her grey eyes and the look of horror in her face give way to bewilderment. She looked suddenly like a frightened child.

"Words don't mean anything, do they, Jane?" she said. "They can't stick in you and start growing. I'll forget what Miranda said some day, won't I, Jane?"

My throat felt dry. "Of course," I murmured, hoping it was the truth.

I saw the bartender hovering round again. I jerked a hand at him. "This time I personally needed his ministrations. Two triple gins," I said to him grimly. "And I don't want nonsense about it."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with surprising docility. "Coming up."

I brought them with the speedy service for which the Yucca is famous. He must have known instinctively that he was the soberest two people in the place.

"I'll be with us shortly," I reminded Peggy. "Lipstick,

Bill McFarlan appeared in the door of the bar. He didn't look exactly like a man who had seen a first-rate comedy. I asked him to join us, since he happened to be in the neighbourhood. He sat down awkwardly beside Peggy and addressed all his remarks to me. Over a small glass of beer he told us about the weather and the prospects of his University football team.

About half an hour later we went home. He didn't talk to Peggy, but he asked her if she would like to drive and, when she shook her head, held open the door for her. He was solicitous about offering her cigarettes and lighting them for her. I think by these unfamiliar attentions he was trying to apologise. At least I hoped so. If not, I planned to give him an earful about his beloved Miranda on the first available occasion.

We drove back at our steady thirty-five; having nothing else to do, I watched the speedometer. We came nearly to a standstill before we turned at Pa's Place—lighted now—into the Palo Alto road. As we did so I realised why Bill's driving had seemed, in spite of my impression to the contrary, so steady. The speedometer was broken. It read thirty-five all the time. The speedometer on our jalopy was less ambitious. It read zero all the time.

The thought of our jalopy introduced more sordid reflections. I had forgotten Dagobert, though I discovered I was still clutching the jack handle. It was a pity I hadn't seen him when we came out of the Yucca Bar. I should have enjoyed watching him with those two flat tyres. They ought, I thought as I entered the patio, to keep him amused for hours.

I said good night and went directly to my room. I found the light and switched it on.

Dagobert lay comfortably tucked up in his bed, sound asleep.

CHAPTER XX

DAGOBERT was curled up on his side, a hand thrust between the pillow and his cheek, a posture which gave him a peculiarly innocent air. His breathing was steady and the expression on his face was unruffled. He looked like a man who has done a good, honest day's work, and who sleeps with a clear conscience.

Many women, of an affectionate nature, could not have resisted running their fingers through his tousled hair or even imprinting a delicate kiss on the high, serene forehead.

I overcame an impulse to crack him lightly on the brow with the jack lever. Instead, I dropped the thing on the floor and began to undress quietly so as not to disturb him. I dropped one shoe beside the bed and coughed discreetly. The placid cadence of his breathing continued. I flung the other shoe against the wall, spilled the contents of my handbag noisily all over the floor, and adjusted the bedside lamp so that it shone directly into his face.

He sighed drowsily, uncurled himself without opening his eyes, and turned with a gentle grunt in the opposite direction.

"So sorry," I said, "I didn't mean to wake you up."

Evidently I hadn't, for he continued to breathe tranquilly.

"So sorry!" I repeated, knocking the tumbler of water he had put on the bedside table on to the floor.

He sighed almost inaudibly. "Are you pie-eyed again, Jane?" he asked.

It was a point I hadn't considered until that moment, and I resented it.

"I smell gin," he yawned. "Don't forget to open all the windows before you turn out the lights." And he relapsed into somnolence.

"Dagobert," I said.

"I know that voice."

"Dagobert!"

He grunted, "You're wearing only one stocking, Jane," he articulated sleepily. "Is this going to be a talk about your clothing allowance?"

"This is not going to be a talk at all!" I said sharply. "Dagobert! Sit up when I speak to you."

He obeyed reluctantly, stretching, but not opening his eyes.

"I don't wish to talk to you," I said.

"Oh, don't you," he said with relief, lying down again and patting his pillow into shape.

"No!"

He was apparently asleep again.

"I said no!" I repeated. "Since this is probably the last time you'll ever see me, I think you might pay a little attention!"

"I'll see you in the morning, dear," he murmured affectionately.

I jerked the pillow from under his head. This wasn't quite the way I had pictured the scene; but if I didn't do something desperate there wouldn't be a scene at all. Anyway, he sat up. He stretched, yawned, gaped, and opened his eyes. He looked surprised and pleased to see me.

"Hello," he said. "What time is it? I've been hanging around all evening waiting for you. Apparently just missed you; came home a few minutes after you left. What did you do—go to the flickers?"

I avoided that pitfall in spite of the casualness of the inquiry. His manner was so disarming that it took actual effort to remember him in the back row of the cinema beside Yolanda. I was obviously married to a monster of duplicity.

I burst into tears. "Oh, Dagobert," I sobbed. "How *could* you?"

He leapt out of bed like a man who is very wide awake. I was feeble-minded enough to let him take me in his arms and even to feel comforted by the sensation of his lips brushing against my forehead, the back of my neck. Perhaps I was pie-eyed after all.

"We can't go on like this!" I whimpered.

"Why not?" he asked, kissing me.

I couldn't think of any valid reason why not.

It was all very well to carry on like this, but we were avoiding the issue.

It wasn't until some time later that I clearly remembered what the issue was. And then it no longer seemed to loom quite so menacingly on the horizon. I couldn't make out whether I had regained my sense of proportion or entirely lost it. The point seemed unimportant.

He lighted a cigarette and thrust it into my mouth, sitting on the bed beside me with his arms around his doubled-up knees.

"And I used to think you appealed to my intelligence," he grinned.

"I can see how that stopped," I sighed. "Honestly, Dagobert, you can talk yourself out of anything."

"I've scarcely said a word."

I blushed and changed the subject hastily. "How did the car run?"

"Two hours flat between here and El Paso."

"You needn't make your story too elaborate," I said. "We're friends—for the moment."

"But I did go to El Paso," he protested. "I was there this afternoon. That's why I couldn't telephone and say I'd be late."

"No telephones in El Paso nowadays?"

"I scarcely wished to advertise the fact that that's where I was," he said importantly.

"Yes, darling," I nodded, flicking cigarette ash against his bare big toe. "You were in El Paso all day. Is it a pleasant town? Did you find out all about who murdered Miranda while you were there?"

He shook his head gravely. "Not while I was there. I found a seventeenth-century edition of Calderon de la Barca as a matter of fact. I wish I could read the thing. And I thought you might like those Mexican silver beads."

A superb necklace of gleaming silver nestled in my powder bowl. It was one of those barbaric things which I had seen with envy several times before in New Mexico. I jumped up with girlish excitement until I remembered that this was the kind of thing husbands traditionally do when they have something on

their conscience. I kissed him coldly on the cheek.

"We'll discuss the lovely necklace and your motives for buying it to-morrow," I said. "I'm glad the car ran so well."

"Except for a little tyre trouble," he amended.

"Oh?"

"Outside the cinema in Alamogordo," he enlarged. "Both rear tyres flat, the work clearly of hooligans."

"Clearly."

"Luckily I couldn't find the handle of the jack, so I couldn't change them," he explained easily. "The garage next door blew them up again for me in a jiffy."

"How remarkably fortunate," I said. "What were you doing outside the cinema in Alamogordo?"

"You'll think I'm an awfully sentimental type, Jane," he said apologetically. "But I was taking a poor little Mexican kid to the movies."

"Do I burst into tears?" I sneered. "You must have been a great comfort to Yolanda. I saw you billing and cooing."

"You did?" he exclaimed, going, I thought, a shade paler. But he recovered himself at once. "Perhaps the incident requires an explanation."

I snorted cynically. "It doesn't. But see if you can think of one."

"Don't rush me," he protested. "That's what I'm trying to do. . . . You see, it's a little like your spending the afternoon with the handsome Doctor Carter."

"It isn't vaguely the same!" I stated. "And stop trying to side-track the conversation. . . . How did you know I'd spent the afternoon with Doctor Carter?"

"I had a drink with him before dinner."

"You have the most fascinating social life when I'm not around. . . . Have you thought yet of why you spent the evening holding Yolanda's hand?"

"Yes," he nodded. "You see, it's like this. There has been a murder here, and I've decided you ought to write it up. We'll have to work in a love interest somehow, but we can discuss that later."

"I am not," I interrupted bitterly, "going to work in a love interest, as you call it, between you and that—that Mexican tramp!"

"The point about a thriller," he continued, ignoring me, "is verisimilitude. I want you to base it entirely on the facts. It will be a best-seller of course, and we can go to the West Indies on the proceeds. You'll like the West Indies. Breadfruit—or is that the South Sea Islands? I'm wandering from the point."

"You've noticed that too?"

"In order for you to achieve this air of verisimilitude I mentioned," he went on inexorably, "it is necessary to study your characters and setting thoroughly. You're a very busy woman, Jane, so I felt I ought to help. While you study the landscape I study Yolanda."

"Why don't you study Larry?"

"There's nothing to study about him."

I dropped my bombshell very quietly. "Are you aware of the fact," I said, "that Miranda gave Larry Fergusson a cheque for three thousand dollars—dated to-day?"

"Quite aware of the fact," he nodded.

It was I after all who jumped. "How?"

"I had a drink early this afternoon in the Yucca Bar with the dealer from whom Larry is buying the Chrysler. I plied him with small beers. He told me about the cheque."

"Oh," I said stupidly.

I remembered now that Dagobert had carefully noted the name of the dealer from whom Larry had bought his car. So my nerve-racking visit to the library to-night had been totally pointless!

"I suppose you also know why Miranda dated the cheque a day ahead," I said. "And why Julian has apparently okayed the money since."

"I think so," he said, stifling a yawn. "We really ought to go to bed."

"Just as you get interesting," I complained, as he tucked me in and refilled the water glass, "you want to go to sleep."

He kissed me, crawled into his bed, and turned out the light.

"Naturally you know," I said, "that the glass of port on

Miranda's bedside table was poisoned and covered with Mr. Voigt's finger-prints."

"I didn't know," he admitted with a singular lack of interest. "But I'm not surprised. It fits. Good night, Jane. I saw a very handsome Longines wristwatch in El Paso to-day. If we're still here at Christmas I'll buy it for you."

I felt my eyes closing heavily and the luxurious relaxation of my body. "How does it fit?" I murmured.

"In the usual way, I suppose. . . . Do wristwatches have to fit?"

"I mean, Voigt's finger-prints."

He didn't answer, and I thought he was asleep.

"I suppose you've got Miranda's murder all figured out!" I exclaimed, trying to introduce a little more liveliness into the moribund conversation.

He grunted with sleepy affirmation. "Oh yes," he said, "I know all about Miranda's murder. Remind me to tell you in the morning. . . ."

This time he was asleep. I tried to do something about it. My mind, as we say, raced; my brain reeled.

Then suddenly I was asleep too.

CHAPTER XXI

THE sun was streaming into our room when I awoke next morning. The birds were singing and the mountains were etched in sharp purple against a sky of cobalt. The air made your heart twist with its crisp, jabbing scent of pinyon and sheer ozone.

I seem to have made much the same comment about yesterday's weather. The trouble with weather in Palo Alto was its perfection. It was for this reason that I had found little response to conversational gambits which opened with: "Lovely day." It was always a lovely day and (writing this in front of a window overlooking Hampstead Heath) I marvel at being able to make the statement so impassively.

It was a lovely day. I sat up, instantly wide awake. It was half-past seven, and I regret to say my first thoughts were about bacon and eggs, tea and/or coffee. Then, with a better sense of what was fitting, I offered up a silent but sincere prayer that breakfast this morning would be a less unsettling affair than it had been yesterday.

Dagobert was already awake, propped up on pillows and deeply engrossed in reading. He waved to me cheerfully from the bed opposite, and I felt a sudden wave of gratitude and relief that I had not last night packed a suitcase and asked Julian to drive me immediately to the railway station in Alamogordo, a thought which during the evening I had once or twice entertained.

"It's who you wake up with that counts," Dagobert remarked in a way interpreting my thought.

I couldn't see what he was reading, but I remembered for the first time that I had put all my notes *re Miranda Ross decd.* on top of his bureau before I went to the movies last night. I saw they were no longer there, and decided that they were what Dagobert seemed unable to tear himself away from.

"The analysis is rather penetrating, don't you think?" I said

modestly. "Of course, there are one or two details which may have to be altered."

He looked slightly confused.

"What you are reading," I explained.

He came to with an effort and handed me the reading matter in which he was buried. It was the seventeenth-century folio of the play by Calderon de la Barca. As an author I was hurt. As a member of the Palo Alto household I was suddenly disturbed.

"What have you done with the notes I made last night?"

"What notes?"

"The notes on your bureau—about Miranda."

He looked blank. I leapt from the bed and began rummaging hastily through the room. When I explained further what I was looking for, Dagobert joined me. We turned the place inside out, but my notes had vanished. Dagobert was certain they had not been on his bureau when he came home last night, a few minutes—it now appeared—before I came in.

My first thought was that someone must have taken them while I was in Alamogordo with Peggy and Bill. I then remembered that Peggy and Bill themselves had come to my room to look for me while I was with Julian and Larry in the library. In other words *anyone* could have stolen them.

"I could," I murmured tentatively, "do them over again."

Dagobert winced. It was the first sign of uneasiness he had given. "No, no," he said hastily. "Please don't do that. I don't know what you wrote, but one copy floating around should be sufficient."

I sank down on the edge of the bed, breaking my rule about no cigarettes before breakfast.

"Poor Dagobert," I said with heartfelt sympathy. "If in America a husband is legally responsible for his wife's actions, this is going to cost you a fortune in damages. I practically accused everybody of murdering Miranda."

"That reminds me," Dagobert said, rapidly pulling on his trousers. "We're having another of those family breakfast sessions. Hurry up. You might be interested."

I hurried up. When Dagobert talks as casually as this he usually

has something up his sleeve. Generally it's something wildly inappropriate, but occasionally it's to the point. I recalled with a vague thrill of anticipation that his final words to me last night had been: "I know all about Miranda's murder."

I reminded him of them with a catch in my breath.

"Did I say that?" he drawled smugly, disappearing into the bathroom.

I followed him. "You're holding out on me," I accused. "I tell you everything."

"Do you?" he said briefly, rubbing his face with shaving cream. "You didn't tell me about your blind in the Yucca Bar last night."

"Well, I will," I said quickly, wondering how on earth he knew I was in the Yucca Bar. "But about Miranda . . ."

He cut a smooth path through the shaving cream on his face with his razor. "Go ahead," he said, "tell me."

I gave him a shortened version of my interview with Peggy. He seemed interested, but not bowled over. He took it in much the same way he had heard about the port glass with Voigt's finger-prints.

"Does it fit?" I asked hopefully.

"Beautifully," he nodded. "Too beautifully. Let's go and have breakfast."

He slipped his arm around me, but I squirmed myself free. "Don't say things like that!" I protested. "How do you mean, too beautifully?"

"I'm only trying to work up your interest."

"You've worked it up."

I chased him out into the patio and followed him breathlessly towards the dining-room.

"What are you going to do?" I demanded.

"You know those scenes in the movies," he said, "where the hero gets all the suspects in one room, chats awhile about this and that, meanwhile cunningly reconstructing the crime. First he throws suspicion on one person, then another, and at last, very subtly and casually, he unmasks the real villain. Trapped, desperate, knowing the game's up, the murderer outs with a gu

and snarls: 'I'll drill the first person who moves.' Then the police rush in and it's all over. You go to the nearest café for a cup of coffee and spend the next half-hour saying: 'But I don't see what the Bank Manager had to do with it. Or was he supposed to be having an affair with that ballet dancer? Why was she killed, anyway? And what the deuce was the taxi-driver up to in the first scene? Mind you, I liked it, but I don't think it quite makes sense.' It's going to be a little along that line, Jane, especially the part about not making sense."

"In brief," I said, "you are going to expose the villain."

"That's roughly the idea."

We had reached the dining-room, but no one had yet appeared. Through the open library door I caught sight of Pa Fergusson wearing his new black sombrero.

"The police," Dagobert explained, "for rushing in at the last moment."

"Dagobert!" I said, beginning to feel worried, "you don't mean a word of this, do you?"

Pa had come to the door, pushing off Bismark the dachshund, whose hair was coming out and getting on Pa's new blue jeans.

"Could I talk to you for a moment, ma'am?" he said.

I glanced after Dagobert, who was proceeding towards the kitchen, and followed the Sheriff into the library. He closed the door carefully after me. He seemed embarrassed. He shifted his tooth-pick from one corner of his mouth to the other two or three times before he could find words. Finally, he said:

"Ma'am, did you know you can get into trouble by not minding your own business?"

"But don't I?"

"No, ma'am. I reckon you don't. . . . As I figure it, you're one of these authors. We got one of them pocket editions of your book down at the store, and Larry tells me it's pretty cute. All about life in England. Maybe you won't listen to an old feller like me, but why don't you go right ahead writin' books about life in England?"

"Instead of about death in America?" I asked.

"Yeah, I reckon that's what I mean." He sat down laboriously

on the edge of a straight chair which quivered beneath his weight, grunting with relief. I think his new cowboy boots hurt his feet.

"Now your old man," he admitted, "is different. For one thing, he's a man and can look after himself."

"What makes you think Dagobert can look after himself?"

"He talks kinda wild, and most of it is hot air," he continued. "But I guess what's good enough for Scotland Yard over there in London is good enough for Alamogordo."

"Did Dagobert tell you he worked for Scotland Yard?"

Pa's bright blue eyes narrowed. "Yeah. Don't he?"

"Yes, of course," I said hastily. "Only—only he's usually so reticent about it."

Pa began to struggle to his feet. There was a look of distinct annoyance on his face which I recognised from his contacts with Dagobert yesterday morning. I added quickly:

"What makes you think I'm writing about crime in New Mexico?"

He relapsed into his chair, grateful for the excuse to delay physical exertion. He looked at me gravely.

"When I was pokin' around here last night I found some notes you made for your new book."

"Was it *you* who pinched my notes? Oh, thank heaven! Where are they?"

I must have shown my profound relief, for there was a twinkle in his eyes as he patted yet another pocket of his jeans.

"I got 'em right here, safe and sound," he assured me. "And I guess I'll keep 'em for a spell if you don't mind. Only don't you go and start writin' no more notes, anyway, not till you get miles away from this place. There's a guy around here, ma'am, who kills people."

"I see what you mean," I nodded, beginning to perspire slightly. "What did you think of them? Were they helpful?"

He drew the pages entitled *Murder of Miranda Rose* from his pocket, frowned, and peered near-sightedly at what I had typed. There were thumb-marks on the pages, from which I drew the flattering conclusion that he had studied them before.

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"There's a couple a things," he admitted. "But the trouble is, you've gotten the main things all wrong." He wet his thumb and flicked the pages over. "I don't get all this about in-tang-ib-le motives, disillusionment, and such-like, but the money part might have something to do with it."
"In paragraph four—about Julian—I emphasise that."
"Yeah, only that's a place where you go wrong. Mrs. Ross didn't leave all her money to Julian. She left it in five equal parts to Julian, old man Voigt, Hal, Miss Peggy, and little Winthrop."

"Oh Lord," I said, doing some swift mental readjustment. My money motive was now spread more thinly over five—or since Winthrop's death—four persons. Even thus divided, it was not to be sneezed at, but I liked it less. In fact, it was only a fifth—or presumably now a fourth—as good.

"You should have told me!" I complained.
A smile passed fleetingly over the expanse of his face. "You'll have to forgive me, ma'am. You see, I kinda reckoned I was supposed to be solving this case."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea if I kept that in mind," I said frankly. "Were there any other places where I went wild haywire?"

"You made one sorta bad mistake," he nodded. "It's because you made right smart out of it. The funny thing is done the same thing—jumped to a lot of conclusions by guesswork, before we had the facts. We don't never want to do that, ma'am."

"No," I agreed. "What?"

"That stopped watch of Miss Peggy's began makin' up figure the murder took place at half-past one," he said. "I began working out that Julian could leave El Paso at forty-five when he telephoned, and maybe get to Palo Alto at half-past one."

"Couldn't he?"

"Sure he could. . . . But the murder took place at half-past twelve."

This time I really started. All my calculations had been

on the assumption that Miranda had been murdered at half-past one.

"Are you positive?" I demanded.

"Doc Carter's been in touch with the State pathologist, and they both tell me Mrs. Ross died within fifteen minutes one way or the other of half-past twelve."

"You couldn't possibly make El Paso to Palo Alto in three-quarters of an hour?"

"Not without an aeroplane."

"Okay," I sighed. "I give up. I resign. . . . Then why did the wristwatch stop at half-past one?"

"Your old man's got some kinda wild and woolly theory about that. . . . Say! I thought you said you'd given it up."

"I have," I said, rising. "The way you gave up yesterday morning!"

But as I walked into the dining-room I felt, in spite of my brave parting words to Pa, discouraged and depressed. Half an hour ago I had had several shrewd, if vague, theories about who killed Miranda Ross. Now I had none.

CHAPTER XXII

BUT Dagobert, of course, was full of theories. I saw him half-way up the table, tucking into grilled kidneys like a man who is worried by nothing except a healthy appetite. All of the others had arrived, but nothing around the table suggested tension. Bill and Hal were discussing a riding excursion; Mr. Voigt, grumbling that he never touched food at breakfast, was nevertheless attacking a huge omelette. Peggy was making Bismark beg for bacon rinds.

In the morning sunlight which flooded the room and made the breakfast silverware gleam, the shadow of Miranda seemed to have faded.

Julian, at the head of the table, rose when I approached, and held a chair for me. I thanked him, wondering how on earth I had once thought him sinister. I ate my grapefruit, and decided that Dagobert had given up his plan for "exposing the villain," if, indeed, he had ever had one! I felt cheated at the thought; he needed a little prodding.

"I like breakfast," Dwight announced. "Best meal of the day."

"It's all right," Voigt muttered, "if people don't talk."

I kicked Dagobert under the table and smiled at Dwight. "You won't like this one—not for long," I remarked significantly.

"Why not?" Julian interposed, pouring out my coffee.

"Dagobert has an announcement to make," I explained.

Both Julian and Dwight looked at Dagobert. Dagobert grinned sheepishly.

"Yes," he said with his mouth full, "Jane and I are thinking about getting married."

At least that stopped the conversation, or rather, after a brief pause, sent it racing into other channels. I kicked Dagobert again, this time more energetically, and decided it would sound silly to explain that we'd been married for more than a year. A few minutes later I heard Sue saying cautiously to Dagobert:

"How do you manage about passports?"

"Forgery," he replied.

I caught her glancing surreptitiously at me several times during breakfast, with a new interest, tinged with a kind of admiration. I had achieved a momentary notoriety.

Interest in my marital status eventually gave way to the more absorbing subject of horses and whether or not we should take a picnic luncheon along on to-day's outing. I was able to finish my breakfast in peace. Nor did I again attempt to prod Dagobert.

Hal finally got up and said that he would go out and rustle the horses. Peggy, muttering distractedly about sandwiches, also rose. Dagobert, who hates being hurried over breakfast, flicked cigarette-ash in his saucer and said:

"I promised Jane I'd unmask the villain at breakfast this morning. Is anybody interested?"

It is difficult to keep your eyes on seven people at once and give a detailed description of their several reactions. I gained an impression of a delayed intake of breath, what is known in film parlance as a double-takem, where a character is not struck by the significance of a statement until a second or two after it has been made. Dagobert's remark caused a kind of mass double-take, I forming part of the mass.

Hal, in the doorway, was the first to find words. "Shall I round up the horses first and come back?" he said.

Voigt said: "What villain?"

"Are there more than one?" Dagobert asked. "I meant, the one in the Miranda affair."

"Do you know who killed Miranda?" Peggy said bluntly. "Who?"

Dagobert poured himself a cup of coffee. "Don't rush me," he said. "This is my big moment. I may add, parenthetically, that I have Sheriff Fergusson's reluctant permission to do this, and that the Sheriff himself is lurking in the library in case of difficulties."

"Is the murderer one of us?" Sue gasped.

Dagobert regarded her with such gravity that the colour in her cheeks slowly faded.

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s and no," he said finally.

"... for God's sake! . . ." Voigt muttered.

lanced at the old man sympathetically. "I know," I said, "I have to live with it."

"at any rate," Dagobert said complacently, "I've got your attention, haven't I?"

le had. "I live with a wife who continually interrupts me," he explained, "and you can't imagine how agreeable it is to have the door to myself. Now . . ."

Julian had scrambled to his feet. His face was drawn and his mouth worked convulsively. I noticed that the cigarette in his hand had burned so short that it must have been scorching his fingers without his being aware of it.

"I think I know what Brown is going to say," he rasped out unevenly. "If so—this is a family matter—and—and I'd be glad if you others would step out of the room. I mean you, Bill, and Sue and Dwight."

Dagobert shook his head. I think he disliked the idea of losing any of his audience. "The Sheriff," he lied, "thinks it would be better if they stayed—especially Bill."

"Why m—m—me?"

Later I understood why Dagobert particularly wanted Bill to remain, though at the moment I was almost inclined to take his explanation at its face value:

"Just part of my technique for throwing suspicion first on one person, then another," he said.

Julian had sunk down without further protest into his chair—Miranda's chair. The rest of us scarcely breathed. Even Hal in the doorway stood like a statue. Dagobert alone appeared at ease.

But as I watched him light a fresh cigarette, I knew he was more frightened than any of us. My irritation with his flippancy vanished, as I knew it was a thin cloak for nerves stretched to the breaking-point. He began badly and I suffered for him.

"There have been several pointers which from the beginning should have told us the secret of Miranda Ross's death," he said. "Let me mention some of them."

He paused, and for an awful moment I was afraid he couldn't think what they were. But he overcame his stage-fright.

"In the first place, she knew she was going to die. She told Hal there was going to be a murder. She dated a cheque to Larry Fergusson a day ahead, when she knew she'd be dead. She asked Jane and me for the occasion, because she believed we would give her death publicity. . . . At first Miranda expected to die surrounded only by her own family, who, who . . ."

"Who hated her," Julian supplied mechanically.

Dagobert shook his head. "No. Whom *she* hated."

I saw Peggy's face as Dagobert said this. It was hard and expressionless. Only Voigt showed signs of emotion.

"God! I believe you're right," he muttered.

"She expected her family to be here. All her family," Dagobert added, turning towards Julian, "and no one else. But two or three details went wrong. Peggy persuaded Bill to stay on for a day, the Karnaks and ourselves turned up unexpectedly, and Julian had an—er—er—engagement in El Paso, an engagement which, for reasons of his own that are beside the point, he refused to break, in spite of the fact that Miranda spent over half an hour arguing with him late Thursday afternoon when he went back to the house to borrow some money from her just before he went off to El Paso."

Julian nodded an imperceptible confirmation and Dagobert continued.

"She expected Julian to come back. He always has come back after these routine business trips to El Paso. But he telephoned at eleven forty-five to say he was staying the night there. He could she told him over the 'phone, get home in less than two hours—by one-thirty, say. . . . Miranda expected to be murdered at one thirty."

"Who by?" Sue prompted, as Dagobert paused.

"That's what I'm working round to," he said.

"If she *expected* to be murdered," Dwight asked, "why if devil didn't she do something about it? Call the police, something?"

"I'm working round to that, too," Dagobert said. "Now we

come to clues. Physical clues which the police work on. First, there is a poisoned glass of port covered with Mr. Voigt's fingerprints. Second, the remains of a Bull Durham cigarette, the kind smoked by Hal. Third, Peggy's wristwatch, stopped at half-past one. Fourth, the physical possibility that Julian could be in Palo Alto by half-past one. The obvious thing about all these clues is that each points to a member of Miranda's family. The question is: Were they not intended to do so?"

Sue caught her breath. We all did. "You think the clues were planted," she said, "by the real murderer."

Dagobert nodded slowly. "They were," he said deliberately. He added: "They were planted by *Miranda*."

In the silence that followed I could hear only the sound of Bismark scratching himself. Even Dagobert seemed a little awed by what he had said. I asked:

"Why?" though I was beginning to understand.

"Miranda so hated the members of her family that she planned her own death to be a vengeance on them." He glanced at Julian. "That was the especial plan she mentioned to you over the telephone."

I was watching Bill out of the corner of one eye. His face was tortured, but I felt no pity for him; Bill's awakening was long overdue. This time Miranda had slipped for ever from her pedestal.

"She c-committed s-suicide?" he whispered.

"Would she go *that* far?" Dwight argued, not wholly convinced.

"It wasn't such an act of courage as it might seem," Dagobert said. "On Thursday, when we were coming to Palo Alto, we saw Doctor Carter who had just left. We understood he'd been to visit Mr. Voigt. Actually he had been with Miranda. He had just performed the disagreeable duty of telling her she had an incurable cancer. She would have been dead anyway within a few months."

Only Hal remained unstunned by this, which was, I think, news to the rest of us. He shifted awkwardly in the doorway from one foot to the other.

"Yes, that's right," he said sympathetically. "I overheard Doc Carter telling her. . . . She never batted an eyelid. . . . Poor Miranda." There was real compassion in his voice.

"Poor Miranda, nothing!" I heard Bill growl softly under his breath.

"Except for Peggy," Dagobert went on, "we can't be sure that any member of Miranda's family actually saw her on the night of her death; but Bill and Dwight and of course Sue saw her earlier that evening. Have you three any further light to throw on the business? Dwight?"

Dwight shook his head. "She seemed quite normal when I saw her about eleven."

"That's what you told the Sheriff yesterday," Dagobert said dryly. "Bill?"

"Nothing that you don't know," Bill said.

"Sue?"

Sue frowned. She was biting her lip, trying to re-interpret Miranda's visit to her last night in the light of what she now knew.

"Yes," she said finally. "She *was* a little peculiar. I can't explain exactly what I mean. I didn't pay much attention at the time. She talked about her family and people, especially about——" She hesitated, and put a slim white hand to her forehead. I wondered if the headache were returning. "Do you mind if I think it over for a while?" she concluded lamely.

"Since Miranda killed herself," Dwight put in, "what difference does it make?"

"None at all," Dagobert shrugged. "None at all." He cleared his throat loudly, twice. "This is where Sheriff Fergusson takes over," he remarked in a stage whisper to me.

Hal, who had followed every word carefully until this moment, suddenly shuffled his feet.

"I'll saddle those horses," he said hastily. "That is—if you-all still want to go riding."

He vanished into the patio without waiting for a reply just as Pa Fergusson appeared at the library door. Pa's hands were in his pockets and his sombrero was pushed back on his head. He

stood for what must have been thirty or forty seconds watching us, his face a circular blank. I noticed how the sunlight glinted from his deputy-sheriff's badge. I saw Dagobert slump back in his chair, glad that his "big moment" was finished.

"You've just heard a mighty interestin' story," Pa drawled finally. "Mighty interestin'. All about how Mrs. Ross at one-thirty the other night fixed to kill herself."

"How she *did* kill herself!" Julian corrected with a shudder.

"Sure."

"All right, Sheriff, you've solved your murder," Voigt put in stridently. "Now get the hell out of here and let us finish our breakfast."

Pa remained unruffled. "You heard how she put suspicion on every member of her family on account she wanted to make trouble. I guess that's right, and them clues don't mean a thing."

He frowned thoughtfully, and his drawl became softer and softer. But we had no difficulty in hearing him.

"I reckon what she done was something like this," he continued. "She picked up a cigarette of Hal's and put it under the bed. She got a glass with Mr. Voigt's finger-prints on it and filled it fulla port wine mixed with them sleeping pills. She took Miss Peggy's watch which was bust and set the hands forward to one-thirty. Then she took Winthrop's jack-knife, which maybe she got from him when he come to say good night, and stabbed herself dead."

He added, so casually that it took us a split second to get it:

"Then she up and took a handkerchief or somethin' and wiped her own finger-prints off the knife. . . ."

Dagobert caught my eye. His glance was studiously meaningless, but I guessed that he and Pa had gone over all this between them. No one moved.

"There's another little thing," Pa added. "I guess she couldn't tell time very well, in spite of all them arrangements about half-past one. She died at half-past twelve."

"Yes," Dagobert said quietly. "I told you how Miranda intended to kill herself at half-past one. I forgot to say that somebody got there an hour early, and saved her the trouble."

CHAPTER XXIII

"*Hél Robin, si tu m'aimes,*" Dagobert sang thoughtfully, "*par amour emmène-moi.*"

I didn't scream, but I felt like it. Ever since breakfast I had had Adam de la Halle, interspersed with Calderon de la Barca and a scheme Dagobert had just thought of for a phonetic typewriter into which you spoke.

"If we're going on this excursion," I suggested, "shouldn't you get ready?"

"I am ready," he said, whittling on a pencil with the new jack-knife he had bought yesterday in El Paso. "Are you?"

He frequently resorts to unfair tactics like this. He knew quite well I wasn't ready.

"Probably I shan't go," I said. "Anyway, I must finish this letter."

"What letter?"

He had me there. It was the same letter which last night had turned into Notes on the Murder of Miranda Ross. I was savagely determined that it would go right this time. It had become a test for my endurance, will-power and, I felt, my sanity. I had got as far as: "Saturday, the 25th of September. My dearest Mother, I've been meaning to write for ages, but . . ."

But.

The word had been an impassable barrier for nearly ten minutes. I should, of course, succeed in arresting Mother's attention if I concluded the sentence: "but my hostess has been murdered." I squirmed in my chair and concentrated.

Miranda had planned to commit suicide, but . . .

I wrote rapidly: ". . . but what with one thing and another." It lengthened the sentence and left me just where I was. I buried my forehead in my hands.

Winthrop could have fallen into the well by accident. But . . .

". . . with one thing and another I don't seem to have time even to . . ."

There's a guy around here, ma'am, who kills people. . . .

The sheet of paper in front of me remained a fixed blur of white. People have hypnotised themselves by prolonged staring at a fixed point, I thought with a shudder. Concentrate. Letter home. A routine, *sane* occupation. You've done it a hundred times. Home. There would be Michaelmas daisies in the garden and a pale mist rising from Porlock Bay. It would be autumn, real autumn, and it would be good to draw the chintz curtains and settle down before the fire. The copper tea-kettle would snore as it leaned against the fire dogs, and there would be scones with clotted cream and honey.

And there would be no guy who killed people.

There would be no spectre of perversity to foul the damp, earth-fragrant air, no twisted tentacles to reach out from the fetid rottenness which was all that now remained of the beauty and grace that had been Miranda Ross.

I no longer judged Miranda even in my heart. Such satanic hatred as hers passed beyond normal comprehension and was easier to stomach if hastily labelled insanity.

"We've been having a most exciting time—trips into the mountains on horseback."

But could the murderer be so easily dismissed? Was the murderer insane?

Dagobert, sprawled on my bed among the scattered pages of his notes on Adam de la Halle, was luckier than I—or more callous. I heard him singing, in a more cautious voice this time:

"Douce fillette, à moi contez, pourquoi cette chanson chantez si volontiers et si souvent?"

I tossed a book at him. It caught him in the small of the back. He looked around with an injured expression.

"Of course it would sound better," he admitted, "with viols, lutes, and perhaps a sackbut or two. It might even sound better if I knew the tune."

"It would sound perfect if you kept quiet and let me finish this letter."

"I haven't been on a horse for years," he said. "I don't even know whether horses still like me."

There had been some discussion after breakfast whether or not the excursion should be put off, but when Voigt—who wasn't going—had bluntly asked "Why?" no one could think of an answer. Julian thought the ride would do us all good and Hal had his heart set on it. The plan was to start about eleven, which would give Peggy plenty of time to make the picnic and Hal to rustle the horses. We were to follow a trail Julian knew which led up into the Sacramento Mountains.

It was still only half-past ten. By a triumph of will—and imagination—I continued my letter to Mother with a vivid description of the dizzy mountain trails we followed, the superb vistas, the camp-fire we made, and how we sang cowboy songs around it and toasted hot dogs on long poles. (Weeks later I had a reply to this letter in which Mother stated she could "almost see" our trip. I then had the ticklish job of explaining to her that it hadn't gone off exactly as I'd described it.)

I was working in a piece about running across a herd of wild deer when Dagobert said:

"If a numerical evaluation N can be assigned to the probable frequency of an event and a second value N_i to a second event, then the probable frequency of their following each other fortuitously is the product NN_i ."

"Yes, dear," I answered, continuing with my herd of deer. "You're so absolutely right."

"The probability of a sequence of such events (N, N_i, N_{ii}, N_r) occurring fortuitously is therefore $NN_iN_{ii} \dots N_r$."

"Therefore," I nodded, "as you say."

"In other words . . ."

"I'd love it in other words," I interrupted. "Does this go on for long?"

I saw he was deep in the book I had tossed at him, the one I had borrowed from the library last night. He seemed to be reading from pencilled comments which Julian had scribbled in the margin.

"In other words, if there is one chance in 52 of drawing the Ace of Spades from a standard pack of cards and one in 51 of next drawing the Two of Spades, the chances are

There's a guy around here, ma'am, who kills people. . . .

The sheet of paper in front of me remained a fixed blur of white. People have hypnotised themselves by prolonged staring at a fixed point, I thought with a shudder. Concentrate. Letter home. A routine, *sane* occupation. You've done it a hundred times. Home. There would be Michaelmas daisies in the garden and a pale mist rising from Porlock Bay. It would be autumn, real autumn, and it would be good to draw the chintz curtains and settle down before the fire. The copper tea-kettle would snore as it leaned against the fire dogs, and there would be scones with clotted cream and honey.

And there would be no guy who killed people.

There would be no spectre of perversity to foul the damp, earth-fragrant air, no twisted tentacles to reach out from the fetid rottenness which was all that now remained of the beauty and grace that had been Miranda Ross.

I no longer judged Miranda even in my heart. Such satanic hatred as hers passed beyond normal comprehension and was easier to stomach if hastily labelled insanity.

"We've been having a most exciting time—trips into the mountains on horseback."

But could the murderer be so easily dismissed? Was the murderer insane?

Dagobert, sprawled on my bed among the scattered pages of his notes on Adam de la Halle, was luckier than I—or more callous. I heard him singing, in a more cautious voice this time:

"Douce fillette, à moi contez, pourquoi cette chanson chantez si volontiers et si souvent?"

I tossed a book at him. It caught him in the small of the back. He looked around with an injured expression.

"Of course it would sound better," he admitted, "with viols, lutes, and perhaps a sackbut or two. It might even sound better if I knew the tune."

"It would sound perfect if you kept quiet and let me finish this letter."

"I haven't been on a horse for years," he said. "I don't even know whether horses still like me."

purely academic. . . . Why don't you get into your riding things?"

"What riding things?" I inquired, hurriedly finishing and addressing my letter.

At eleven o'clock Dagobert was champing to go, and I was sewing a button on my brown slacks. I should have been ready minutes before had he not harassed me.

"Have you washed your teeth?" I asked, hoping to give him something to do apart from standing in the door, telling me to hurry.

I have to think of all these things. That is why I sometimes do keep him waiting a moment or two. He said he had brushed his teeth—which may or may not have been true—and I told him he *might* hang up his clothes for a change. He wasted more time in arguing that it was less important to hang up clothes than to be on time, and I pointed out that he could have done this while he was arguing.

In this way eleven o'clock passed; we heard the drawing-room clock chime.

"Besides," I said, "I've written a letter home, done my nails, and mended a stocking. While you've done nothing."

"I've been thinking," he said. "The trouble with the phonetic typewriter is that it would throw millions of typists out of jobs. I think we'll drop the scheme and go to South America instead. . . . You've already combed your hair."

"Look, my dear," I said patiently, "why don't you go on this trip alone? I have lots of things I could do here."

To my disgust this appealed to him. I could see it by the way he began to hem and haw, protest that it wouldn't be any fun without me, and was I absolutely sure I didn't mind?

By this time, I must confess, I was really hustling. I had scrambled into my slacks, tied a knot in one shoelace, and dusted powder in the direction of my nose.

As usual my wild last-minute rush had been unnecessary. Hal had only just finished saddling the horses. Peggy and Sue were still packing the food in the saddle-bags. Julian, in the library, was talking to Pa; he was telling the Sheriff where we proposed to ride, and there seemed to be an argument about the best trails.

drawing both consecutively are 52 times 51, or 2,652. Now there is one chance in 50 of drawing the Three of Spades, but to calculate the probability of drawing in sequence the Ace, Two and Three of Spades, 50 must be multiplied by 2,652, giving the figure 132,600."

"That's the kind of thing I hate about cards," I said.

"Now we come to the crux of the business," Dagobert said. "If such a sequence does in fact occur, we can consider it highly probable that the events are *not* fortuitous, but are causally connected."

He let the book drop. "Julian means," he said, "that the cards haven't been correctly shuffled or else they've been stacked."

"This may have an intimate bearing on Adam de la Halle," I said, "but I'm certain it would bore Mother."

He nodded absently. "Give her my love," he murmured. "If there was one chance in a hundred of Miranda dying and one chance in a hundred of Winthrop's accidentally falling into the well, there would then be only one chance in ten thousand of both events occurring consecutively."

"But they did!" I pointed out impatiently. "That's the trouble with mathematics."

"Your protest, Jane, leads us at once into the problems of epistemology."

"Like hell it does," I said, returning to my letter.

"There may be ten thousand to one against something happening," he said mildly, "and yet we still can't rule out accident. Now if the deaths of Miranda and Winthrop were followed by a third—er—similar occurrence, the betting would be one million against there being no causal connection. Do I make my point clear?"

"You mean, if someone else gets murdered," I said, "you'll begin to think somebody's doing it!"

"You grasp these things so quickly."

I didn't, for it wasn't until a moment later that I felt my head somersault. I gasped out: "What do you mean! If anybody else gets . . .?"

"Not a thing," he interrupted quickly. "The discussion was

purely academic. . . . Why don't you get into your riding things?"

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Dwight was sitting aimlessly at the piano, playing strings of broken chords and arpeggios which hadn't yet made up their mind whether to turn into a recognisable tune or not.

After making conventional offers about being helpful, we sat on wicker chairs outside the drawing-room, and fed potato chips to Bismark. Voigt suggested a "stirrup cup." We resisted feebly and ineffectually. I could easily have done my hair again.

The sun was nearly overhead by this time, and it was pleasant to sit in the shade watching the quivering shadows of the cottonwoods on the blue grass in the patio. The birds had stopped singing, but the fountain plashed coolly, and the formidable array of Western ponies in front of the house whinnied and switched flies off themselves with their tails. Behind us I was conscious of Dwight still playing. Voigt was telling Dagobert about a time years ago when he had hunted with the Quorn, and his wife—apparently they had been in England on their honeymoon—had made the egregious error of asking the Joint Master why, if foxes were vermin, they didn't shoot them. It was a long, involved story, relieved only by the whimsical tenderness with which Voigt referred to his wife's social blunders, and I only half listened, half listening at the same time to Dwight.

The arpeggios had turned into some kind of melody now, a lush sultry pattern of sound which was vaguely familiar.

Bill joined us, and shortly afterwards there were shouts from Hal and Peggy that we were ready to go.

Bill walked across the patio with me.

"I wish I could play the piano the way Karnak does," he said.

"I wish I knew as much about atomic physics as you do," I replied.

"I suppose everyone's right when they say Karnak ruined himself by going in for popular music," he pursued the subject doubtfully. "I don't know anything about it, but I kind of like that new thing of his. It makes you feel kind of yearning. Churned up inside. I can't express it exactly."

"What new thing of his?" I asked.

"What he's just been playing. I'll never forget it. It's been running through my head ever since that n-night."

I looked at him blankly. "What gives you the impression that Dwight Karnak composed that thing he just played?"

"But he did," Bill explained. "It was the piece he thought up that night—the piece he worked on until nearly three o'clock in the morning. You remember—he told us."

I remembered of course that Dwight had got an idea for a new song while climbing the hill that first evening, and that he had come home and sat up half the night working it out on the piano. But I also knew that Dwight did not compose the music he had just been playing.

"God knows I ought to remember it," Bill was saying. "I lay awake long enough listening to it."

"I see," I nodded, knowing it would be useless to argue.

But the business kept disturbing me, I don't know why. I was still brooding about it when Dagobert joined me beside the immense steed which Hal had picked out for me to ride.

"What was that thing Dwight was just playing?" I asked as I eyed the lofty slopes of my beast.

"Wagner," he said. "*Tristan and Isolde*. The 'Liebestod.' Don't be a snob, Jane, and pretend you didn't recognise the mellifluous strains of the 'Love-Death.' . . ."

CHAPTER XXIV

I put an experimental hand on the muscular shoulder of my horse, not quite knowing what to expect. It appeared to be indifferent to my approach, only turning its head to peer at me with large, mildly astonished eyes.

"The 'Love-Death,'" I murmured, quivering slightly.

Dagobert patted the beast with, I thought, unwarranted familiarity.

"There's no need to take such a gloomy view," he said, holding the stirrup for me. "He's called Snowdrop. Hal tells me he has a reputation for steadiness and amiability. You put your left foot in this thing."

I obeyed automatically. I don't know why I let people shove me around. As I started the perilous ascent I felt Dagobert's steadying hand under my elbow.

"Have you ever been on a horse before?" he asked.

I nodded grimly. "Of course! Once on the beach at Bournemouth when I was eight. It was a Shetland pony, and it didn't like me."

Around us people were flinging themselves recklessly into saddles, shouting horsy phrases, and causing much dust and confusion. I caught a glimpse of Sue, in white jodhpurs and a divine yellow tweed jacket, astride a nervous, snorting creature, on which she apparently felt quite at home. I gritted my teeth and grasped the saddle-horn. Dagobert shoved.

"Some husbands would feel nervous about entrusting their wives to a monster like this," I said. "I meant, the 'Love-Death' was what Dwight was playing on the night Miranda died. Bill heard him."

Dagobert nearly dropped me. I should not, of course, have said a thing like that half-way up a horse. He recovered himself—and me.

"How singularly appropriate," he remarked.

I was now precariously balanced about half a mile up from the ground, but Snowdrop maintained a pose of stolid indifference.

"You pull this one when you want to go to the left," Dagobert explained, handing me the reins, "and that one when you want to go to the right."

I nodded; the device seemed quite ingenious. But as our cavalcade set forth, I found there was no correspondingly simple arrangement for making a horse go straight ahead. Snowdrop refused to move. He merely gazed after the other departing horses and leaned down to crop a blade of grass, sighing contentedly. He liked it here at the house, and I was beginning to agree with him.

Peggy spoilt it by giving him a sound thwack on the rump, which startled us both. Snowdrop set off at a reluctant jog, while I clung for dear life to the saddle-horn. For the first quarter of an hour Dagobert stuck fairly close to me. Finding that I didn't fall off, he finally dashed ahead and joined Julian and Sue, who were leading the party.

Peggy fell back and rode beside me for awhile. Her levis were tucked into a handsome pair of leather boots. There was a noticeable improvement in her appearance. She had clearly not spent the whole time between breakfast and eleven in preparing luncheon. She had taken trouble with her hair, and her make-up was considerably more *soignée* than my own.

"It's swell fun, isn't it?" she said.

I didn't argue. We chatted for a while about horses and the scenery and the kind of nail varnish I was wearing. Dagobert, who had rejoined us, grew a little restless as this last subject was introduced. He only appreciates other women's nail varnish.

Peggy looked wistfully at her own hands.

It wasn't so much nail varnish she needed as new nails. But her hands were less rough than usual, as though she had had a go at them with hand-cream.

"I suppose eventually they'll look less repulsive," she sighed. "I'm trying that trick of sleeping in gloves. Jeeze, what a business!" She leaned across and gave my horse another slap on the rump. "Snowdrop's a good horse, but he's lazy. Give him a good

kick occasionally," she advised me, spurring ahead again. "You want to show him who's boss."

I smiled bitterly, knowing the answer to that one.

Nevertheless, and without kicks, the relationship between me and Snowdrop steadily improved. Probably he decided that if I left him alone, he would leave me alone. We began to respect each other's independence. I said quite seriously to Dagobert:

"Why don't we ride more often?"

He came out of his stupor. "Is Dwight attractive?" he said.

"I don't know. I never thought of it. If we do, it might be sensible to get a habit in America, rather than spend coupons when we go home."

"Well, do think of it."

"I am. Sue gets her jodhpurs at a place in New York called Abercrombie and Fitch."

"I mean Dwight."

Discussions are apt to go like this on horseback. Snowdrop obligingly chose this moment to stop for a tuft of alfalfa which grew beside the path, and the others disappeared around a bend in the canyon.

"Dwight?" I repeated, considering the question. "I'm not really competent to judge, having rather peculiar tastes in men. The sleek, well-groomed type has its appeal to certain women. In fact," I added thoughtfully, "it has its appeal. Yes, now that I think of it, Dwight has a definite attraction. He's big and smooth, yet manly and virile. He's gentle and sleek like an over-fed puppy, yet there is that occasional flash of danger about him, his ungovernable temper for instance. He's apparently rather dull and conventional, and yet he may be a musical genius. He's——"

"Don't work up too much enthusiasm," Dagobert protested.

"He has one quality which many women find irresistible."

"I was afraid of that."

"In the eyes of the world he's the completely successful, adult male. But inwardly I suspect he's a great big cry baby who wants to have his hand held, who likes to be reassured that he's really as important a fellow as he appears to be."

"Is he in love with his wife?"

"Probably," I said.

"What about the separate bedrooms?"

"Purely Miranda's idea, I gather. Yes," I continued, "he's in love with her and slightly bored with her at the same time. He's in love with her a little the way a boy is in love with his mother. He longs to dash off on other sentimental adventures and yet come rushing back to tell Sue all about it. This is guesswork, of course."

But I couldn't help remembering Dwight's tone of voice when he spoke to Miranda that first day over the telephone, the sighing, the touch of sentimental supplication. Then there was his irritability when he mentioned Sue's headache, followed that evening by the delicate, perhaps apologetic, touch of playing Brahms' 'Cradle Song.' Most revealing was Sue's telling me that Miranda had never had an actual love-affair in her life; Dwight himself must have told her that.

Snowdrop, undisturbed by the conversation, continued to munch alfalfa; Dagobert too seemed to have forgotten we had a long journey ahead of us.

We were not after all the last of the cavalcade. Bill McFarlan had straggled even farther behind than we had. He came trotting up with a preoccupied look on his face.

"Oh, hello," he said, coming to, and reining in his horse.

I wondered if his preoccupation had the same cause as our own. Dagobert asked cheerfully:

"What's on your mind?"

Bill unexpectedly blushed. "As a matter of fact," he confessed, "I was just thinking of the new cyclotron we're building out at the research station."

"Not soap?"

"Not soap," Bill nodded grimly.

We jogged along together for awhile, catching an occasional glimpse of the rest of the party winding up the canyon ahead of us. Finally Dagobert said:

"Tell us more about the fight you had with Karnak."

"There's not much to tell," Bill said. He added, almost with

the beginnings of a smile: "I got a black eye—as you may have noticed."

"I mean, how did it start? Did he pounce on you unexpectedly?"

Bill coloured. "No," he said. "As a matter of fact I started it."

"You?" I cried.

Bill nodded, looking ashamed of himself. "Karnak called M-Miranda a—well, a pretty filthy name, so I took a swing at him. He swung back. I missed. He didn't."

"What did he call her?"

Bill glanced swiftly at me, blushing more deeply, and lowered his voice. "A whore," he murmured hastily. "Because he'd seen me coming out of her room, I suppose." He was silent for a moment, then added: "She wasn't *that*, anyway. . . ."

"No!" Dagobert shook his head slowly. "But it's interesting that Karnak should have called her one. . . . Then you retired. Who retired first?"

"Karnak did. I hesitated for a moment for fear Miranda might have heard us. That's when I noticed the curtains were drawn. I also picked up a letter I had dropped during the scrap; one from Lever and Gimble that I'd just shown Miranda. Then I retired, say about five- or ten-past twelve."

"You didn't hear Peggy going in to say good-night to her sister?"

"No."

"But you heard Dwight in the drawing-room, playing the piano!"

"Yes. The same tune he played before we started to-day."

"Until nearly three?"

"Yes. Because I remember the clock chiming three times shortly after he stopped. You can just hear it from my room."

"Yes, I know. Did he play *continuously* from the time you went to your room until nearly three?"

Bill hesitated, realising the importance of his answer. "That's my impression," he said at last. "Of course, I had a lot of—of other things on my mind."

"I'll bet you had," Dagobert said dryly. "Did you hear one o'clock strike?"

Bill nodded absentmindedly; Dagobert repeated the question more sharply.

"Yes, I know I did," Bill said. "Because I remember thinking, 'God, it's only one o'clock!'"

"Did you hear two o'clock strike?"

Bill let his horse come to a walk, the reins loose. "No," he said finally. "Now that I think of it, I didn't. Why was that? I'm certain I didn't drop off to sleep for awhile."

"Perhaps the reason you didn't hear two strike," Dagobert suggested, "was simply because Dwight was playing the piano."

"That was it. Of course."

"And yet you heard one strike. . . ."

Bill gasped audibly. The implication was so obvious it took his breath away. The chime of the drawing-room clock was so faint from the rooms around the patio that the slightest sound of music would have drowned it.

In other words, at one o'clock Dwight had *not* been playing the piano!

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"But having said it"—Dagobert blew out a match and flicked it away—"you have us all agog to hear more."

"What did she say?" I asked. "So I can be agog, too."

There was a moment's awkward silence, then Sue said in a flat voice: "Miranda, of course."

I murmured "Oh!" and hoped someone would change the subject. I think Sue did too. Julian said with a harshness that startled me:

"At breakfast Sue said Miranda talked strangely that night. I—in fact, all of us—want to know what she means and who Miranda especially talked about."

"It was stupid of me to have said that," Sue admitted.

"Was it *me* she talked about?" Julian demanded brutally. "If it was, for God's sake say so! I don't care."

"Besides," Dagobert said mildly, "you're the only one of us who has a cast-iron alibi—you and Sue."

Sue laughed briefly. "Mine's not much good," she pointed out. "Miranda was the only person who actually saw me take the nembutals and you only have my word for that."

Dagobert shook his head. "No. We also have Miranda's. She said, over the 'phone, she'd given you something to make you sleep. Both Julian and I heard her."

"But how do you know I actually took them?"

"Did you?"

"I did, as a matter of fact. But——"

"How many did you take?"

"Two." She glanced at Dagobert curiously. "Does it matter?"

"Everything matters," Dagobert murmured impressively. Then he grinned: "If you'd said one or three, Pa would have gaoled you on the spot."

"Then thank heaven I guessed right!" Sue smiled. "Why?"

"Because," he said in the tone which he employs for giving "inside information" and by which I recognise the probability that he is making it up as he goes along, "because the nembutal

bottle found in your room had not been opened before that night—the seal over the cap was found by your bedside. And there were exactly two nembutals missing from the bottle. Who did Miranda talk about if it wasn't about Julian?"

"I think," Sue said, rising, "I'll go and help Peggy with luncheon."

Dagobert retained her by the hand, pulling her down on the ground beside him again. I noticed she didn't put up much of a struggle.

"You're suppressing vital information," he said. "Besides, I like to talk to you. You may have made that provocative statement at breakfast only to attract attention. I often do. But you may, without knowing it, be in possession of the missing piece that will solve the jigsaw puzzle which is beginning to"—he glanced at Julian—"to get on all our nerves."

Sue frowned. "You're right, of course," she said quietly. "What Miranda said was all on the theme of how much there was to do and how short a time there was to do it in. She was thirty-five, and I thought she meant how few *years* there were left." She broke off with a shudder. "Poor devil . . . I didn't know she meant how few *hours* there were left."

"You said she talked about one person especially."

She nodded. "I know I did. I exaggerated. I spoke without thinking. In the first place, she talked a little wildly about everybody, including Bill and ourselves. She said not one of us really liked her. She said she hadn't a genuine friend in the world." She sighed, plucking a blade of grass and twisting it between her fingers. "Which I suppose was true. . . ."

Sue looked up at us from the ground at which she had been staring. Her eyelashes were wet. Her voice shook. "Whoever killed Miranda committed an act of kindness!" she said. "Can't we leave it at that?"

Dagobert shook his head. "No, I'm afraid we can't. There's Winthrop, you see."

"But that *could* have been an accident," Sue said dully.

"It could have been murder," Julian put in roughly. "Who did Miranda talk about?"

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There was a moment's awkward silence, then Sue said in a flat voice: "Miranda, of course."

I murmured "Oh!" and hoped someone would change the subject. I think Sue did too. Julian said with a harshness that startled me:

"At breakfast Sue said Miranda talked strangely that night. I—in fact, all of us—want to know what she means and who Miranda especially talked about."

"It was stupid of me to have said that," Sue admitted.

"Was it *me* she talked about?" Julian demanded brutally. "If it was, for God's sake say so! I don't care."

"Besides," Dagobert said mildly, "you're the only one of us who has a cast-iron alibi—you and Sue."

Sue laughed briefly. "Mine's not much good," she pointed out. "Miranda was the only person who actually saw me take the nembutals and you only have my word for that."

Dagobert shook his head. "No. We also have Miranda's. She said, over the 'phone, she'd given you something to make you sleep. Both Julian and I heard her."

"But how do you know I actually took them?"

"Did you?"

"I did, as a matter of fact. But——"

"How many did you take?"

"Two." She glanced at Dagobert curiously. "Does it matter?"

"Everything matters," Dagobert murmured impressively. Then he grinned: "If you'd said one or three, Pa would have gaoled you on the spot."

"Then thank heaven I guessed right!" Sue smiled. "Why?"

"Because," he said in the tone which he employs for giving "inside information" and by which I recognise the probability that he is making it up as he goes along, "because the nembutal

bottle found in your room had not been opened before that night—the seal over the cap was found by your bedside. And there were exactly two nembutals missing from the bottle. Who did Miranda talk about if it wasn't about Julian?"

"I think," Sue said, rising, "I'll go and help Peggy with luncheon."

Dagobert retained her by the hand, pulling her down on the ground beside him again. I noticed she didn't put up much of a struggle.

"You're suppressing vital information," he said. "Besides, I like to talk to you. You may have made that provocative statement at breakfast only to attract attention. I often do. But you may, without knowing it, be in possession of the missing piece that will solve the jigsaw puzzle which is beginning to"—he glanced at Julian—"to get on all our nerves."

Sue frowned. "You're right, of course," she said quietly. "What Miranda said was all on the theme of how much *there was to do* and how short a time there was to do it in. She was thirty-five, and I thought she meant how few *years* there were left." She broke off with a shudder. "Poor devil . . . I didn't know she meant how few *hours* there were left."

"You said she talked about one person especially."

She nodded. "I know I did. I exaggerated. I spoke without thinking. In the first place, she talked a little wildly about everybody, including Bill and ourselves. She said not one of us really liked her. She said she hadn't a genuine friend in the world." She sighed, plucking a blade of grass and twisting it between her fingers. "Which I suppose was true. . . ."

Sue looked up at us from the ground at which she had been staring. Her eyelashes were wet. Her voice shook. "Whoever killed Miranda committed an act of kindness!" she said. "Can't we leave it at that?"

Dagobert shook his head. "No, I'm afraid we can't. There's Winthrop, you see."

"But that *could* have been an accident," Sue said dully.

"It could have been murder," Julian put in roughly. "Who did Miranda talk about?"

The bluntness of the question sobered her, I thought. Her answer, though disappointing, made sense.

"The man—that is to say—the person in whom Miranda was especially interested may have nothing to do with her death," she said deliberately. "In fact, I'm convinced that person had nothing to do with it. Every member of your family, Julian, is under suspicion of murder. For that matter we, your house-guests, are too. If I mention a specific person's name, it will only increase suspicion against him—or her. If the murder is never solved—and it may not be—this suspicion will remain like a shadow over someone's life. I don't care to assume that responsibility. Therefore I've come quite coldly to the decision that I shall keep my mouth shut. I only wish I had in the first place. . . ."

"I wish you had too," Julian muttered. "Because——" He broke off, and all three of us looked at him. He added a little self-consciously: "Because someone may be worrying about it." We continued to stare at him and he went on. Like Sue, he obviously regretted he had ever begun. "I mean, as you say, it casts a certain suspicion on the person referred to—and that person . . . well, you know what I mean. That person may be unnecessarily worried."

Dagobert nodded agreement. "Or necessarily—as the case may be."

Sue laughed, but I thought she looked pale. "The innuendoes are getting too thick for my limited intelligence," she said.

She looked up and across the mesa as though to find a visual object to distract her. She saw Dwight, intently focusing his camera on Hal and the horses. A slow smile softened the taut outlines of her face.

"He's cute, isn't he, with his five-hundred dollar Leica," she murmured with affectionate indulgence. "Of course, he always took much better pictures with the old five-dollar box Brownie we used to have."

"Is Dwight fond of Wagner?" Dagobert asked.

Sue looked at him in bewilderment. "Good heavens, no!" she exclaimed. "Are you?"

"I find certain parts of *Tristan* not unmoving," he said.

"One used to, I suppose," she admitted. "I haven't heard it for years. Naturally Dwight went through the *Tristan and Isolde* phase in his extreme youth—most musicians do. Now the *Meister-singer* has a certain elephantine good humour which is rather disarming, but Wagner on the whole——"

"Miranda liked Wagner," Julian contributed. "Especially *Tristan and Isolde*."

"Miranda," Sue smiled gently. "Well, naturally. . . . Dwight!" she called out suddenly, feeling that the subject might profitably be changed, "come over here and take our pictures."

Dwight complied eagerly, and we spent the next fifteen minutes carefully rearranging ourselves in informal groups and positions, chatting and laughing unnaturally, peering out over the White Sands and wondering what our hair looked like, while Dwight made abstruse calculations with his light meter. I could imagine long winter evenings in the Hollywood Tudor Mansion with the photograph album, and Sue running through these group photographs, saying: "Look, that's me!" and, "There I am on the left. Those two? I can't remember their names. They were English, I think. Why on earth she thought she could wear slacks I can't imagine, but some women never learn."

The ordeal was finally finished and Peggy shouted: "Come and get it," by which she meant luncheon was ready. She and Bill had set out the food beneath a clump of pines, and though we did not toast hot dogs on long poles around the camp fire, the crisp salad, the galantine of turkey and the iced beer were, apart from minute traces of sand and an occasional pine-needle, excellent. They would have been better still in the comfort of the dining-room at the ranch, but we all said: "There's nothing like eating out of doors," a statement which is indisputable though subject to various interpretations.

When we had finished we made a bonfire of the paper plates and cups and buried tin cans and bottles. Everyone seemed to be very restless all at once. Hal went over to help Julian inspect saddles and tighten saddle-girths, saying:

"If we're going to reach the top of the mountain we'd better get going."

I eyed Snowdrop from my luxuriously recumbent position on a bed of pine-needles. He was browsing happily, though he regarded Hal's approach with faint uneasiness. Clearly he lacked ambition to get going. Snowdrop and I had much in common.

"Hurry up, everybody!" Peggy was shouting, "we've got to make Bald Peak by three-thirty."

"Why?" I murmured, not liking the sound of Bald Peak.

"Because that is what we said we'd do," Julian said dryly.

He had returned from the horses, and now stretched himself on his back at full length on the turf beside me. He lit a cigarette and adjusted the wide brim of his Stetson hat over his face to protect his eyes from the sun.

"Does it matter what we said we'd do?" I asked, piqued by the note of irony in his voice.

"Vitality," he said, making no signs of motion. "We set ourselves an objective before we started—Bald Peak. Bald Peak is bleak, wind-swept, and the view is less attractive than from here. But we said we'd get there. The fact that we might prefer to linger where we are is immaterial."

I nodded philosophically. "I know. Excelsior. I've always thought that was a silly poem."

"It is in the best American tradition," he said. "We consider it better to arrive than to travel hopefully."

"But you personally don't agree," I suggested, encouraged by his immobility.

"How should I know?" His voice was muffled under the big sombrero. "I've never arrived . . . nor for that matter travelled very hopefully."

He sat up abruptly, tossing his Stetson aside. There was a faint grin on his face.

"I," he said, "have been talking literally through my hat. Shall we go?"

I nodded, and neither of us moved. For a while we lazily watched the others. Bill and Dagobert were already galloping wildly across the mesa in a way which couldn't be good for their digestions. Hal was helping Sue to mount her roan mare. Peggy cantered towards us, yelling something about "Are you coming?"

Julian told her we'd catch up after we'd finished our cigarettes, and to be sure to take the left fork at Panther Creek.

I watched the dust as the horses followed the rising mesa towards the mountain face. Julian handed me another cigarette, but forgot to light it. He was gazing expressionlessly down across the foothills which rolled away beneath us, green in the foreground, but progressively paler and more barren and vaguer until they merged at last into the arid flatness of the plains. Almost all of this vast expanse belonged, I knew, to the Palo Alto ranch. It was the Ross empire. I wondered idly how many thousands of acres it contained, or for that matter how many hundreds of thousands of acres.

"You must love it," I murmured aloud.

He didn't answer, and I thought he hadn't heard me. I stirred and began to wish I'd ridden ahead with the others. He suddenly turned to me with a smile of apology.

"Sorry," he said, "I was thinking. Well, not exactly thinking. Ranchers don't think. We ruminate. Our minds wander." He lighted my cigarette, cupping the match in his brown hands. "No," he said finally, "I don't love it—if you mean Palo Alto or the South-west. You love things you create, the land you make, not the land that makes you. No one loves the South-west except tourists. Have you never noticed how many cowboy songs express a kind of dread of their land. 'Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!' It is every cowboy's aspiration to escape. But he never does escape. You may remember the point of the song is that 'they paid no heed to his dying prayer. . . . In a narrow grave just six by three, they buried him there on the lone prairie.'"

"Why can't he escape?" I asked.

I said "he" as though I referred to the hypothetical cowboy, but we both understood that I meant Julian himself. He glanced at me speculatively, then smiled.

"If you asked the average cowpuncher that question he'd probably say: 'Oh, I don't know. This is where I belong, I guess.'" He broke off with a brief laugh. "You see the implication," he added. "Not this belongs to *me*, but I belong to *it*. . . . I tried to escape it once. Sorry. I'm getting autobiographical."

"Autobiography is the one subject which never grows tedious," Lencouraged him.

"Especially to the speaker," he added.

"When," I said quickly, "did you try to escape . . . and why didn't you succeed?"

For a moment he ignored the question. Then he said: "I thought I was going to be a mathematician. Locally I was considered a bright young fellow, because I knew more about geometry than the teacher in Alamogordo. My mother thought I was a genius. 'You're too smart for ranchin', son,' she used to tell me. 'There ain't no future in the cattle business. You're goin' to make you a position in the world, back East, where folks'll appreciate your brains.'" He broke off and looked around at the horses, which were already small figures at the far side of the mesa. "You asked for this, Mrs. Brown."

"So you went to Yale University," I prompted him.

"Yes, I studied, took a degree. I was offered a job teaching. It would have meant a smug, tidy, civilised existence among intelligent, civilised people. It would have meant no more burning summers when the grass on the range is so sparse that cattle become skin and bones and die of thirst, no more sudden dust-storms to obliterate your hopeful efforts at cultivation, no more interviews with bank managers to raise mortgages on what's left of the stock. In fact, it sounded swell."

"What happened?" I asked, waiting for Miranda to make her entrance.

"Nothing happened exactly. I kept writing Mother how fine everything was, but said I was too busy to come home for the summer vacation. Then suddenly I knew why I wasn't coming home. I was scared. That sounds kind of silly, doesn't it? I realised that all the while I'd been thinking—no, not thinking, only ruminating like I was a while back—about Palo Alto, about Bald Peak, about this mesa, about how those loathsome dust-storms would come sweeping over the White Sands and how they'd blot out the sun in an awe-inspiring veil of murky yellow and how the fine sand would sting against your cheeks and make you feel angry and mean and yet so fighting-alive. I knew I was *afraid*

to come back. Because if I came back, I'd stay. . . . I wasn't a promising young mathematician after all. I was just a plain ornery cow-puncher."

"So you gave it up and came back," I said when he paused.

"Not without a struggle," he admitted, fingering a pine-needle thoughtfully, then using it absentmindedly as a toothpick. "I met Miranda," he said.

"Yes?"

He recovered his hat and rose. I had the feeling that his autobiography had come to an abrupt conclusion, as though the word "Miranda" was another way of saying "Finis." Her name had fallen like a dead weight into our conversation. I tried to revive it.

"Had Miranda something to do with the struggle you put up?"

"Now that you mention it, she had," he answered slowly. "She was everything Palo Alto was not. She was civilisation. You couldn't imagine Miranda in a rough, tumbled-down place like Palo Alto—like Palo Alto used to be, I mean. We were going to live on Long Island, surrounded by Country Clubs. Maybe over coffee and liqueurs after dinner I might flick ash off my Corona. Corona and tell her stockbroker friends about life in the picturesque old South-west, but that was to be the nearest I ever got to the place. . . . Anyway, that's how I figured it and it suited me fine. I didn't really marry Miranda for money the way plenty of people reckon, but, well, in a way, I did marry her for security."

"But it didn't work," I suggested. "The 'Lure of the Golden West' was too insistent."

He grinned ruefully. "No," he said, "the joke of it was that Miranda insisted on coming out to New Mexico."

"Why on earth?"

He crouched down, Western style, sitting on his heels. He pushed back his Stetson and scratched his head in a gesture reminiscent of Pa. "I dunno," he said. "I've often wondered. Why does anybody ever come out to live in this god-forsaken country? Why did my folks come in covered wagons? Why did the Mexicans come before us? And the Apache Indians before them? There were plenty of places on the earth where it must

have been possible to earn a livelihood and lead a decent life. But they had to push in here where droughts, floods, tornadoes, could wipe them out in a season. It's like those Italians who build villages on the slopes of Vesuvius knowing that the thing may erupt any moment. In our schoolbooks it's not called stupidity, but the Pioneer Spirit, and is very highly praised. I think it's something else—just ornery pigheadedness. Plain, mean aggressiveness. The South-west knocks the chip off people's shoulders, and they want to fight it, conquer it, make it submissive and obedient.

"The country's dotted with such battle-fields. You've probably seen them—fields with the plough-scars overgrown with tumbleweed and cactus, deserted shacks beside dry wells standing crazily askew beneath a dead cottonwood, old torn blocks of concrete where someone optimistically tried to build a dam to catch the flood waters. People have fought the South-west and fought each other for possession of it. Sometimes they lick each other, but never the South-west. It just uses them, owns them like I said, while they *think* they own it. I guess the Spaniards thought they were fine Conquistadores when they took the place from the Indians. We—I mean my forefathers—felt pretty smart when we stole the place from the Mexicans. We changed it from Nuevo Mexico to New Mexico, and despised the Mexicans because they didn't put up a better fight.

"Now there's a fresh wave of conquerors: the rich people from the East, people like the Voigts. They treat us—I mean, people like Hal and Pa Fergusson and me—the same way we used to treat the Mexicans, with the same mixture of contempt and tolerance, something to be preserved for our sentimental and picturesque value. Sometimes they even mate with us—as our ancestors mated with the Mexicans, and the Mexicans with the Indians before them. We settle down happily in their new dude ranches and wear our native costumes, our cowboy boots and sombreros, and sing 'Home on the Range' when requested, hold Rodeos for them, and act like picturesque, well-behaved natives. . . ."

The mockery in his voice vanished suddenly, but the bitterness

beneath it was all the more stinging in the humility with which he added:

"Well-behaved natives exactly describes us. . . . No, Mrs. Brown, we haven't much to be proud of. We haven't put up any better fight against the—the Voigts, than the Hernandez put up against the Rosses."

His voice trailed away and stopped. I heard one of the horses, tethered a few hundred feet down the slope, whinny; miles away, on the distant plain, a train whistled nostalgically at a level-crossing. I glanced at Julian, but he was again ruminating and oblivious of my presence. I saw his brown fingers, clutched over his knees, tighten convulsively, relax and tighten again. Obscurely I felt that in the losing battle he had described, his own part, to which he referred so contemptuously, was not yet finished.

And I remembered with an inward muscular constriction that *someone* had fought the Voigts, and that Miranda Voigt was dead.

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CHAPTER XXVI

JULIAN calculated that the others could not be more than a mile ahead of us; by trotting we should catch up with them comfortably in half an hour. Privately I wondered about the "comfortably" part, but to my surprise I felt less stiff after five minutes in the saddle. Julian taught me the Western trick of sitting sideways in the saddle while jogging, supporting your weight on one leg. I confessed to him about the Shetland pony at Bournemouth, and he told me he could make me into a real horsewoman in a week. Even at the end of fifteen minutes I think Snowdrop was impressed by my improvement.

The far edge of the mesa was a streak of chrome yellow, chamiza, I learned, or Chryso-thamnus. I memorised both names in order to spring them nonchalantly on Dagobert.

Panther Creek, which our trail up to Bald Peak followed, ended its precipitous course down the mountain-side in a dry gully at the upper rim of the mesa. The path wound through a grove of aspens, climbing steadily and at first wide enough for us to ride abreast. It was deliciously cool in the shade and already the high dry air had a bite in it. From occasional clearings in the woods we caught glimpses of the mesa below us, a soft green billow, astonishingly diminished in size. It was a vivid measure of how high we had already climbed.

By this time the path had narrowed, and Julian rode ahead of me. The horses were beginning to breathe more heavily, and once or twice we paused to give them a rest. In the silence we could hear the sudden excited squealing of chipmunks in the trees, and with startling clarity above us the sound of the rest of the party as their horses clambered up the rocky path. They sounded no more than a few hundred yards ahead, but Julian said they were still nearly half a mile away.

Once, when we paused and listened, I thought Julian stiffened. He was ahead of me and I couldn't see his face, but the im-

pression was instantaneous. I don't know what gave me the sudden sense that something was wrong; the feeling was as light and fleeting as the stir of the breeze among the aspen leaves overhead. I rose in my stirrups, as I knew Julian himself was doing, and held my breath. I could still hear the invisible party ahead, in fact I thought I recognised Peggy's loud laughter, but there was certainly nothing in the sound—at least to me—to cause anxiety.

Julian glanced round; his face was immobile. "Shall we go a bit faster?" he suggested.

He didn't wait for my reply, but struck his horse briskly with his riding quirt. Snowdrop, though deprived of his customary breathing spell, followed valiantly. I held on to the saddle-horn, dodging branches which overhung the trail, and wondered why the sudden increase in pace. Snowdrop was panting slightly at the end of five minutes and I was too. This could be caused by the high altitude, but whether the altitude could also account for the increased speed of my heartbeat I do not know. I do know that my heart was thumping.

I kept well up with Julian, but he did not look round to see how I was doing. He seemed to be strained unnaturally forward in the saddle, and there was a tension in his bearing which inevitably communicated itself to me.

I was frightened, and I knew not of what.

We didn't stop, although the horses now badly needed to. At this pace we must catch up with the others in a minute. I found myself badly wanting to see Dagobert again. I clenched my teeth together, for I realised they were chattering.

The path climbed a sharp knoll and widened in a little clearing where Panther Creek split in two. The creek was a trickle of water at this point; the path crossed a negligible ford and curved left up the spruce-covered shoulder of the mountain. On the right a precipitous gorge tumbled down in a petrified cascade of loose rocks.

Julian had brought his horse to an abrupt halt at the ford. It fussed at the reins, trying to drink, but he held it back in a grip of steel. His face was dark, and I saw him glare from one fork of

the creek to the other. Even I could distinguish the hoof-marks of our party. They had deserted the main trail to the left which crossed the stream and clambered up the minor trail to the right.

"They went this way, didn't they?" I said, pointing.

He nodded. "Yes." And added sharply: "I specially told Peggy the *left* fork."

"Does it matter?" I asked, trying not to sound anxious.

I'm not sure, but I think Julian was also trying not to sound anxious. "No," he said, "not a bit. It's the shorter route to Bald Peak as a matter of fact. Only—only the trail's rougher. You have to take it easy over two or three patches of rough shale. Hold tight, and follow me."

He jerked his horse, still unwatered, towards the steep slope which plunged up into the heart of the gorge. Snowdrop miraculously followed. It seemed to me to be practically straight up, and I felt my saddle straining back at the girth around Snowdrop's belly. The ascent was brief if sharp, and we reached a relatively level patch above.

"There are worse scrambles farther on," Julian told me. "But the horses are used to this kind of thing. It looks worse than it is." He smiled, but did not entirely succeed in reassuring me. "We take this path when we want to scare Easterners."

We dodged through scrubby oak for a few minutes, and I tore my slacks in two or three places. Occasionally I thought I heard the sound of horses ahead of us, but we did not stop again to listen. Trees were becoming scarcer and more stunted, and to the left the bleak mass of Bald Peak rose majestically. The path ahead of us—clear of undergrowth at last—was hidden by a sharp fold in the ravine. Though the sun's rays beating on your face were hotter than ever, the air itself was cooler and touched by the early autumn snowfields on the distant Sierra Blanca twenty miles beyond. I breathed my lungs full of it.

Then I stopped breathing. I felt Snowdrop quiver under me, snort, and shy off to a sudden halt. Julian's horse, too, had reared back to a full stop. I think the two horses heard the sound before we did: the sound was a kind of prolonged, agonised whinny, a tear of rocks, and a single human scream.

Then, most horrifying of all, there was a brief moment's dead silence. The mountain ahead stood grim and still and indifferent; as though it had never known the intrusion of man. Over the ravine a single carrion-buzzard hovered, poised on nothingness, the only living thing in sight. And while I stared at it Dagobert's words came back to me, swift, inchoate, not a clearly formulated thought, but a phantom of formless dread. "If the deaths of Miranda and Winthrop were followed by a third—similar occurrence . . ."

Julian had his horse in hand again and was lashing him savagely forward. I heard the renewed scrambling of loose shale and the pitiful groan of a horse in agony. At the same time there was the sound of approaching hooves. A single horseman appeared suddenly around the bend in front of us. I thought for a second his horse was out of control, but he reined in as he met Julian. It was Dwight.

I urged Snowdrop forward, and was in time to hear the words: ". . . about a hundred yards around the edge. The saddle slipped—horse got tangled in the girth and panicked. I'm getting Doctor Carter."

Dwight dug his spurs into the horse and thundered past as though he didn't see me. My throat was dry. I reached Julian and croaked tremulously:

"What happened?"

"An accident."

I clutched my saddle with fingers that had no strength in them, afraid of the question which was suddenly the only question of importance in the world.

"Who?"

My gasp was so feeble he didn't hear it, and I had to repeat the word. It echoed hysterically from the ravine beneath us.

"Who?"

"Sue!"

For a second I wasn't sure whether I'd heard him correctly or whether it was another distorted echo of my own voice. He repeated Sue's name.

How cruelly selfish fear is! For a moment I had no feelings

left over for poor Sue. Dagobert was safe, and nothing else was important. I breathed for the first time since Dwight had ridden past, pointedly—or so it had seemed—ignoring me. I breathed the way I used to breathe during the war when a flying bomb sailed safely over my own house and exploded somewhere else.

Julian had disappeared around the bend in the path ahead. I followed with more difficulty, for Snowdrop was skittish and reluctant to approach any nearer. At the bend I caught sight of our party only a stone's-throw away. At that point the path corkscrewed almost straight up the mountainside to avoid a bed of loose shale which had blotted out the former trail.

I learned later that Peggy had been leading the party. She had climbed successfully up above the shale, expecting the others to follow. Sue was just behind. Behind Sue Hal was riding, with Dwight, Bill, and Dagobert bringing up the rear. According to Julian they must have been too closely crowded together. Sue's mare in turning had missed its footing. It had scrambled straight upwards in an effort to recover itself. Whether the saddle-girth had given under the strain or whether it was too loose no one could say; but it slipped back over the mare's withers and the mare, suddenly frightened, had kicked and bolted forward across the loose shale.

Hal, just behind, made a frantic attempt to snatch at the mare's bridle, but only excited it further. It fell, and Sue with it. She might have fallen free of the saddle had the stirrup given as it should. They were patent stirrups with a trick catch to release the foot, so that the rider if thrown should not be dragged. But the catch hadn't worked. It was caked with adobe mud and looked as if it hadn't been cleaned for years. The mare plunged, rolled over and dragged Sue with it.

Dagobert, Bill told me, was the quickest to reach Sue. I felt very proud later that afternoon as I put court plaster on the cut on his forehead. Dagobert had reached her, and with his new jack-knife swiftly cut her free from the stirrup leather. The mare rolled again, but Sue remained inert where she had fallen.

When I reached the scene Dagobert, Bill, and Peggy were crouched over her huddled body. Julian, chased away by Peggy,

was cautiously scrambling down the loose shale to where the roan mare lay quivering against a clump of scrub oak which had stopped its fall into the ravine below. Hal was already there. I heard him shout up to his half-brother:

"Left hind-leg broken. I guess there's nothing else to do."

Julian descended no farther. "All right," he said. "Will you?"

I wasn't sure what the conversation was about, but even from where I was I could hear the reluctance in Hal's voice.

"Okay," he called, and I saw him turn slowly towards the mare.

Julian looked away sharply, his face set, but even yet I didn't know what it was all about. Then I heard the crack of a gun. The echo trembled up and down the ravine. I saw Julian wince and Hal turn away again from the roan mare. There was a Winchester rifle in his hand, and the mare which he had shot lay still at last.

CHAPTER XXVII

She wasn't dead. She was badly bruised and probably suffering from concussion, but miraculously no bones appeared to be broken. That she had escaped with her life was undoubtedly due to Dagobert's quickness in cutting her free from the faulty stirrup.

The crack of the rifle had made her open her eyes. She was lying on her back, and she stared up at us with the startled, incomprehending look of a person who awakens in unfamiliar surroundings. She didn't recognise any of us, and I saw fear start in her eyes. Her lips moved with an effort.

"My baby . . ." she faltered. "My baby!" The whimper rose suddenly to a wail of anguish. "Where is my baby? You've taken my baby! You've——"

She struggled up on her elbows. I was amazed at the ferocity of her strength and the fire of accusation in her eyes as she stared without recognition from Dagobert to me and from me to Peggy. The effort exhausted her and she fell back, panting for breath. She closed her eyes, and I exchanged a glance with Dagobert.

Dagobert had expressed interest in Sue Karnak's baby from the beginning. He must have been struck, as I was, by the contrast between the casual, almost off-hand way Sue herself had mentioned her approaching motherhood at breakfast on Friday morning and the agony in her voice just now. It wasn't hard to guess which attitude was sincere and which affected. I prayed fervently that her fall had not injured the unborn child.

Sue opened her eyes again; this time there was the dawning light of reason in them.

"What happened?" she murmured.

Peggy explained, and Sue immediately inquired about the roan mare. She blanched when Julian told her Hal had had to shoot it.

"Where's Dwight?" she asked suddenly.

"He went off hell-for-leather to get Doc Carter," Peggy said.

Sue achieved a faint smile of gratitude. "I hope he'll be care-

ful," she said anxiously. "I'm all right—I think." In spite of our protests she tried to move. "No bones broken, anyway," she reported. "I've fallen off dozens of horses."

She gulped down the contents of Julian's water-bottle avidly. We tried to make her lie still, but she insisted on seeing whether she could stand up. With a little support she succeeded. The question arose whether she should wait here until Dwight came back with Dr. Carter or whether she should attempt to ride slowly back to meet them.

Sue insisted we were making too much fuss about nothing. She was, I think, still a little giddy in the head.

"Why," she suggested, "don't the rest of you finish the climb? I'll find my own way back quite easily. Perhaps someone," she hesitated, then added quickly, "perhaps Dagobert will come with me. If you don't mind, Jane."

"We all mind," Julian said firmly. "If anybody goes we all go."

"No!" It was a small defensive whimper as though someone had touched her on an exposed nerve. She smiled quickly with her lips. "I mean, no, I won't spoil the excursion."

"Anyway, we're short of a horse," Hal pointed out practically.

Sue regarded him with slow wonder. "How could you, Hal?" she whispered. "How *could* you shoot my horse?"

"I guess I had to," Hal shrugged. "There was nothing else to do. His leg was busted."

It was still only a little past two, and Sue complained of the sun's heat. We decided she should go back at least as far as the woods. Hal gave Sue his horse. I noticed that he carefully inspected and tightened his saddle-girth before he handed the rein to her. He insisted on following us on foot, having first—explained—to remove Sue's saddle from the dead mare.

Sue let Dagobert help her to mount. Bill had again repeated the story of how Dagobert had cut her free and Sue, perhaps not unnaturally, showed a marked preference to remain close to her rescuer. It was more than gratitude: I think Dagobert was the only one of us she had complete confidence in.

Sue Karnak had been more badly scared by her fall than she pretended.

Although Julian, who now led the way, kept the pace of the procession down to a slow walk, Sue lagged behind with Dagobert, who brought up the rear. I rode in front of her and looked round often to see if she was all right. She reported that she was quite recovered, but her face was drawn, and when she smiled it cost her an effort.

She spoke little, Dagobert told me afterwards, but she apparently did much serious thinking. I imagine that the "innuendoes which had been too thick for her limited intelligence" at luncheon to-day were beginning to assume firmer outlines. Dagobert didn't actually ask her if she would now divulge the name of the person Miranda had especially talked about that night, but he felt she was inwardly debating the subject.

Once she asked him to tell her exactly how the accident had happened. She listened to his account carefully. The stirrup, she said, was her own fault. She had noticed the mud on it yesterday, but had done nothing to free the catch. The slipping girth, too, could only be blamed on herself. She should have noticed it before. Probably it had not been sufficiently tightened after the picnic luncheon. Many horses had the cunning habit of distending their bellies when the girth was being tightened so that the saddle should be looser and more comfortable to carry. Undoubtedly that was what the roan mare had done. It was by no means the first riding accident to be caused by this phenomenon.

Before we regained the fork where Panther Creek divided, Sue had, Dagobert told me, convinced herself that her fall was purely accidental. Had she, I wanted to know, equally convinced him?

Dagobert smiled non-committally at this question. "She has not studied Julian's notes on the theory of probabilities as carefully as we have," he said.

I had forgotten the details of Dagobert's abstruse calculations, but I remembered the answer all too vividly. It was a million to one against there being no connection between the deaths of Miranda and Winthrop and the accident, so nearly fatal, which had occurred on the slopes of Bald Peak.

"But as you say," Dagobert shrugged, "that's the trouble with mathematics."

This conversation took place after we'd reached Palo Alto. Meanwhile I'd stuck close to the others, partly to allow Dagobert and Sue privacy, partly to observe what general impression the incident had made. I observed nothing of interest. Bill was fussed and worried, Julian grave and taciturn, while Peggy, who blamed it all on herself, was subdued. Once—at the fork—she offered to lead the way, and when Julian dryly pointed out that he didn't think much of her leadership she flushed.

"I know you said the left fork," she admitted sheepishly; "but we—that is I—decided on the right. I wanted to scare the pants off Dagobert."

"You succeeded in scaring the pants off all of us," Julian said briefly.

Sue insisted that she felt fine and we continued. As we reached the mesa Dwight galloped up. He had telephoned Dr. Carter, who would be on his way shortly. Voigt had horses saddled and would bring the doctor as soon as he reached Palo Alto. Sue laughed at her husband's breathless agitation and told him not to be so dramatic.

"Did you think I was dead when you rushed off like that?" she asked.

Dwight reddened. I thought Sue took a kind of perverse pleasure in his discomfiture. "No—of course not," he said. "Oh, Sue—oh, thank God!"

She patted his hand lightly, giving it a little squeeze. "You can't get rid of me so easily as that, my dear," she teased.

We were interrupted at that moment by the arrival of another horseman. It was Pa Fergusson. Both Pa and the unfortunate horse that supported his vast bulk were soaking with sweat. He grunted with satisfaction when he saw Sue.

"You all right, ma'am?" he said.

When Sue assured him that she was, he wasted no further words of sympathy. Pa expected people to fall off horses. He addressed Julian.

"What happened to the horse?"

Julian explained that it had been shot.

"You let it lie just like it was?" Pa said. "I mean, you didn't tamper none with the saddle or nothing?"

Julian frowned. "You didn't expect us to leave a good saddle just lying there, did you?" he said. "Hal's looking after it."

Pa's voice was gently reproving. "You shouldn't of done that, son," he murmured. "I'll ride up and meet Hal." He brushed the flanks of his horse regretfully with his spurs, touching the brim of his hat again to Sue. "I sure hope you'll be all right, ma'am," he said. "The Doc'll fix you up. I reckon we won't have no more of these horseback trips. Patrolman Jones is down at the house."

And with these equivocal parting words he rode off towards the trail which led up Panther Creek. Peggy followed his departure with puzzled eyes.

"What's suddenly gotten into Pa?" she asked innocently.

Julian answered her with a deliberation which left us all momentarily speechless.

"Sheriff Fergusson," he said quietly, "believes that someone attempted to murder Sue."

Peggy let out her breath in a long gasp. "Jeeze!" she whispered. I saw Dwight glower at Julian, furious with him for bringing out into the open what all of us had been wrestling with internally.

"At any rate," Dwight growled, "you weren't there. You have an alibi. As usual."

"On this merry note," Sue interposed hastily, "I suggest we ride back to the ranch and stop talking nonsense. I happen *not* to think any of you were trying to murder me, and the conversation about it is so boring it's beginning to bring on my headache."

The remainder of our journey down the dry canyon was made almost in silence. Dwight stuck close to Sue with a kind of dogged, protective air: Sue herself still seemed most at ease with Dagobert. She kept edging her horse back from Dwight as though to be nearer Dagobert who followed, and when the path at last widened sufficiently she rode beside him. In normal circumstances I might have resented this, but I couldn't dismiss the thought

that Sue was slightly less confident than she seemed. The idea however, that she might actually be a little wary of her own husband did not occur to me.

It wasn't until we reached the ranch-house and were dismounting under the baleful observation of Patrolman Jones that Dagobert and I could exchange a private word. He said:

"Did you see who tightened Sue's saddle-girth after luncheon? I shook my head. "Did you?"

"No," he confessed, "and I feel that discreet inquiries on this subject would not add to our waning popularity."

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN spite of Dwight's insistence, Sue flatly refused to go to her room until the doctor came. She said she'd be more comfortable in the hammock on the patio, and besides, she would like to join Dagobert and me in a cup of tea if tea were available. She limped across the patio and collapsed into the hammock. Sue was in greater physical pain than she admitted, and I thought her mad not to go to bed.

Peggy went to the kitchen to see about tea, muttering helplessly to herself: "I suppose they'll all want dinner too." Bill tried to help, and was chased away. I remembered how in Miranda's day he had been allowed to help with the *enchiladas*, and admired Peggy for branching out on a path of her own. From now on, I felt, the less she tried to imitate her glamorous sister, the better.

A few minutes after four Dr. Carter drove up. Sue went meekly with him, obviously relieved at no longer having to pretend that she was feeling fit. Dwight followed them, but was sent out again to join us. He was restless, and finally went into the drawing-room, where he softly picked around on the piano. He did not play the "Liebestod," nor did he, as I'd half expected, play Brahms' "Cradle Song."

Julian had taken the two fresh horses which Mr. Voigt had had ready and gone back towards the mesa to meet Hal and the Sheriff. Mr. Voigt joined us for tea, which he drank with lemon and rum, and talked about riding accidents.

The doctor reappeared and confirmed our diagnosis that Sue was suffering from nothing worse than shock and bad bruises. He had given her a sedative and she was not to be disturbed.

"She's locked her door so that she shan't be disturbed," he added, when Dwight asked if he could see her.

Dr. Carter promised to come back to-morrow morning and Dagobert walked out to his car with him. I decided to have a bath. I always do my clearest thinking while stretched out

luxuriously in a bathtub. It was high time I got clear about the events of this afternoon.

But the bathtub turned out to be one of those shower things where you spend most of your time adjusting knobs in order alternately to freeze and scald yourself, and the rest of your time trying not to get your hair wet. My first clear thought, as I stepped on a cake of soap and regained a precarious balance by clutching at the oilcloth curtains, was that Sue's fall had no meaning whatever. Might not I, this very minute, have slipped on that cake of soap and broken my neck without its having anything to do with Miranda's murder?

The beautiful simplicity of this theory appealed to me, though it didn't get me very far. Nor of course did I believe it for a single minute.

I examined the alternative: an attempt had been made on Sue's life. Why?

Because Sue had hinted she knew something which might incriminate the person who had killed Miranda. Miranda had spoken with especial emphasis of this person. Who?

Obviously one of the people who had had an opportunity to kill Sue this afternoon. At one fell swoop this eliminated half my original suspects. Only Bill, Dwight, Hal, and Peggy (plus of course Dagobert) were present when the accident happened.

My heart leapt, and for a second I thought I had it. In my excitement I grabbed at the wrong knob and gave myself a horrible shock of cold water. Gasping, I escaped and wiped soap out of my eyes with Dagobert's dressing-gown. By the time I had put on some clothes and was sitting disconsolately in front of my dressing-table wondering what to do about my hair, the vision had gone. I felt deflated, cheated, caged. I felt like a person who has momentarily glimpsed the truth to have it instantly obliterated. The fog had lifted, only to settle down again at once, thicker than ever. I was left doubting whether it had lifted at all.

With my eyebrow pencil I idly scribbled on the back of an envelope: "What did Miranda tell Sue? And about whom?"

Dagobert came in, humming the "Liebestod." He made it sound offensively cheerful.

"There are one or two aspects of this case which puzzle me," he said. "Mainly, who did it—and why? How do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"What you need is a cold shower and a brisk rub-down."

"What I need is a less hearty husband—and a drink."

He pulled off his boots. "Have you ever seen an excited rattlesnake?" he asked.

"Now that you bring the subject up," I said, "I haven't. Give me a drink, and I'll ask you what you're talking about."

He poured me a glass of something called Tequila which he had brought back from El Paso yesterday. It removed some of the enamel from my teeth, but it helped.

"Go ahead," I said, spluttering slightly.

"Young Winthrop told us, 'Mom was as excited as a rattlesnake,'" he said, pausing in the bathroom door. "When Dwight saw Miranda an hour or so later, he reported that she seemed 'quite normal,' 'her usual self.' An hour after that Peggy said she was, well, in a very odd state."

He disappeared into the bathroom before I could say: "So what?" When he returned a few minutes later, rubbing himself vigorously and splashing water all over the room, I was cautiously measuring myself another Tequila.

"I could acquire a taste for this," I exaggerated. "Wouldn't you be in an odd state if you were going to commit suicide?"

He nodded and examined in the mirror the small cut on his forehead with pride. I told him he had behaved very bravely this afternoon and patched it for him. He winced and asked anxiously:

"Do you think it will disfigure me permanently? Hello! You've been solving murders again." He was studying the scribbles I had made on the back of the envelope. I expected a rude remark, but he frowned thoughtfully: "A very pertinent question, Jane," he said.

"She must have said something to Sue about *one* of them. Peggy, Voigt, Hal or Julian. . . ."

"They think so too," he nodded. "Has this occurred to you—have another Tequila and it will—has it struck you that Miranda

ink, or—D-Dwight re-saddled her horse. So for God's sake let's stop thinking everything that happens around Palo Alto is attempted murder!"

"I couldn't agree with you more," Dagobert said mildly. "My wife is the morbid type." He looked at me with gentle reproach. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Jane. I must try it some time. . . . Getting back to what happened *before* midnight. You'd been here for several days before Miranda died?"

"A week, to be exact."

"During which you'd become considerably smitten with her."

"I admired her."

"Admired Miranda; indeed, the top of admiration. . . . Full many a lady I have eyed with best regard, but never any but some defect in her. . . ." Dagobert quoted vaguely, flicking through the pages of Bill's copy of *The Tempest* in order to go on. Luckily he couldn't find the place. "But no billing and cooing?" he queried. "No this and that? Sex didn't rear its ugly head?"

"I'm too old for this kind of conversation," I said, giving Bill time to flush and shake his head.

"The whole thing," Dagobert summed up, "was just a beautiful platonic friendship. . . ." He sat up abruptly. "Correct me if I have an unpleasant mind, but what was the big idea of tapping on *her bedroom door at midnight?*"

"I"—Bill swallowed hard, glanced at me, and took another gulp from his tooth mug—"I wanted to show her that letter from Lever and Gimbles."

"Where is it?"

Bill nodded towards the waste-paper basket. "In there, if you don't believe me."

"I believe you," Dagobert nodded, relapsing into a recumbent position. "You'd got the letter presumably through the post some time during the morning, so you wait until midnight to take it along to Miranda's room. I always take etchings so there will be no doubt about my intentions. Sorry, Jane."

"No, I love to hear you show off," I smiled sweetly. "But how did you know *Julian* wouldn't be there?"

"Maria Hernandez told him."

I remembered that the Mexican maid had been Dagobert's first modest triumph. That morning in Miranda's bedroom he had trapped Maria into admitting she knew Julian was going to spend the night in El Paso, when no one except Julian could have known it.

"All right," I said in a daze. "Maria told Bill. How did Maria know?"

"Yolanda told her."

"Does this go on for long?" I asked. "How did Yolanda know?"

"Julian told her."

"Would you mind repeating that?" I said weakly. "Julian told Yolanda he was going to stay the night in El Paso. Yolanda told her cousin Maria. Maria then told Bill."

Bill flushed again. "Well, yes," he stammered. "M-Maria thought I was keen on Miranda and—well, she has a romantic turn of mind."

"Wait a minute!" I cried. "Why did Julian tell Yolanda in the first place?"

Dagobert sighed. "I wanted to protect you, Jane, from these sordid details," he said. "Julian more or less had to let Yolanda in on the arrangement. Because they spent the night in El Paso together."

Bill was more shocked by this information than I was.

"Julian!" he muttered incredulously. "Well, I'll be darned! I didn't think he had it in him."

Julian's potentialities were, I thought, consistently underrated in Palo Alto. Under Miranda's reign it had become an article of faith that Julian Ross was a nonentity, incapable of any action, even of mild misbehaviour.

"Did Larry suspect what Yolanda was up to?" I asked.

Dagobert nodded. "Larry's fine Western pride was cut to the quick," he said. "It was, however, assuaged slightly by the cheque for three thousand dollars which Julian made good in the library last night."

"But Miranda herself originally wrote out that cheque."

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"I should have begun at the beginning," Dagobert said. "I mean, five or six years ago when Winthrop was born. Yolanda was Winthrop's mother. Winthrop's father was dead. Miranda know this?" Bill said. "She found out as soon as she came back from Europe. She immediately adopted the child." "Wasn't that rather—er—noble?" Bill's perplexity deepened.

All of Miranda's actions were noble—on the surface. We can never be quite sure why she adopted Winthrop and made him one of her heirs. Did she love him in her twisted way? Did she want to get possession of him because he was part of Julian? Or did she loathe him as the normal fruit of a normal activity which she had never known? Your guess is as good as mine." Bill sighed. "God knows, the poor little devil loathed her!" "What did Larry think about it?" "Larry," Dagobert said, "made a reasonably good thing out of it. Miranda dreaded the thought of the scandal coming to light; appearances were very important to her. So she let Larry blackmail her—on condition he kept his mouth shut and didn't divorce Yolanda."

"How many people knew all this?" "Miranda and Julian, Larry and Yolanda," Dagobert said. "And Pa, I think, has a shrewd suspicion." "None of us spoke for a moment. From the farm-buildings behind the ranch a cow lowed thoughtfully. Bismark in the patio was yapping and scurrying across the grass, chased by Peggy, whose fresh voice broke agreeably in upon our darker preoccupation with her sister. I think Bill's tension relaxed at the sound."

The clock struck six; the sound roused Dagobert from his reverie. He held out his empty glass, doubtless a reflex conditioned by a thousand former pub-opening hours. "We generally have one about now," he murmured automatically. "Bill, did Miranda tell you to come to her room at midnight?"

Bill's hand, grasping the bottle, shook so violently that he spilled more whisky on the carpet than he poured into Dagobert's glass. His face was ashen. Even Dagobert, who had plainly intended the question to be startling, looked astonished at its effect.

"No," Bill said. "No. No, she didn't—she didn't."

It sounded more like an instinctive defence than a calculated lie.

"All right, she didn't," Dagobert placated him.

I frowned at him pointedly, feeling that this was the moment to apply the screws. But he shot off at a tangent.

"Did Miranda kick you out of her room at ten minutes past twelve?" he asked, going over ground which, I felt, we had already sufficiently covered.

Bill nodded. "I told you she did."

"I know." Dagobert looked sadly at the minute quantity of whisky which was all that had been rescued from the bottle. "Jane, why don't you get in touch with Voigt, and see if you can't do something about the liquor situation?"

I ignored this transparent attempt to get me out of the room.

"Isn't it time you stopped acting like a gentleman?" Dagobert suggested impatiently. "Did she kick you out? Or *did you suddenly scam?*"

Bill sank down on the arm of a chair. His face was greenish as though he felt distinctly sick.

"I'll go and find another bottle," he volunteered feebly. "Does it m-matter why I went?"

"Yes."

"All right. I—I suddenly b-beat it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. . . . I——" He looked at me and broke off. He was sweating slightly. "She was—kind of peculiar suddenly. Not like herself at all. Sort of crazy. I don't know. For God's sake let's skip it."

"Jane was brought up on Freud and Kraft-Ebbing," Dagobert said. "Besides, she's already had a glimpse into the seamy side of Miranda's mind; Peggy had an earful of it shortly after you did. In a word, sex did raise its ugly head?"

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Bill's teeth were chattering slightly. "I've always thought that was a c-comic phrase," he whispered. "It isn't. Ugly is right. . . . Freeze!" he added, rising, "if Jane won't get that whisky, I will."

He bolted for the door. He looked like a man who suddenly and urgently needed fresh air.

Dagobert got up from the bed and walked over to close the door Bill had left open.

"Let's go," I said. "Did he return at half-past twelve to Miranda's room and murder her?"

"We'll ask him when he comes back. . . . I wish the murderer had stopped short with Miranda, and then we could stop worrying about him."

I nodded, wishing the same thing. I watched Dagobert toss his lighted cigarette into the waste-paper basket. A curl of smoke arose. I watched it idly for a moment before saying:

"We need a fire around here to liven things up."

Dagobert took the hint and recovered the cigarette. He came out of the waste-paper basket with a crumpled ball of paper. He smoothed it out. It was the letter from Lever and Gimble which Bill had taken to Miranda's room, dropped in the rose garden during the fight with Dwight and afterwards recovered. It verified at least one detail of Bill's story.

Dagobert glanced through it, crushed it up again, and let fall back into the waste-paper basket.

Then he noticed the second smaller slip of paper which had been crumpled up with the Proctor and Gimble letter which had floated independently to the floor. He stooped to it up.

I saw him freeze suddenly.

By the time I reached his side he had already folded it and slipped it into his pocket.

"If I'm going to help you," I complained a little breathlessly, "you'll have to start taking me into your confidence. Stop lying things!"

I made a dive for his pocket. Reluctantly he removed the paper and unfolded it.

"I was afraid Bill might suddenly return," he apologised. He added a note of warning which proved to be only too unnecessary: "This is merely going to confuse you."

It did. On the slip of paper were written four words:

"One o'clock. Your room."

The handwriting was Miranda's.

CHAPTER XXIX

"THERE are still one or two aspects to this case which puzzle me," Dagobert said as we left Bill's room without waiting for his return.

"Such as," I quoted sarcastically, "who did it and why."

"No, not so much that," he mused.

"*That's* why Bill said she hadn't invited him to her room!" I exclaimed. "She'd promised to come to *his* room." I was so excited I nearly missed the provocation in his last remark, "What do you mean you're *not* puzzled by who and why!"

"Jane," he said gravely, "you know perfectly well I say things like that for fun." He changed the subject. "By the way, Bill was wrong when he said Dwight re-saddled Sue's horse after the picnic. At the time Dwight was showing me his light meter. Bill was merely doing a bit of quick covering up for Peggy. . . . I wish I knew what to do next. Adam de la Halle doesn't seem to grip me as much as usual. Why doesn't one of us know something about motor-cars?"

Dagobert in these moods is impossible. He gets them when he is on the verge of a Great Idea. You have to give up attempts at consecutive thought and follow along with him. I said:

"Why? Won't the jalopy run?"

"The jalopy?" he muttered dreamily. "What jalopy? I made a bad mistake this afternoon, Jane. You're quite right in one sense. She'd promised to come to his room. But she never got there. D'you know, this is absolutely none of our damn' business?" He kicked a stone with sudden viciousness. "We're not even being paid for it."

I followed him out to the drive in front of the house, hopeful that we might be going somewhere in the car. The sun was setting over the ragged edges of the Organ Mountains beneath a torn fringe of clouds rimmed with yellow-gold. The lower Sacramento range to the east where we had ridden to-day was a

glow of pink lavender beneath a sky of pale, water-wash blue.

We heard horses clopping down the valley, and finally caught sight of Julian, Hal, and the Sheriff jogging leisurely homewards. From behind the house came the sound of Maria's voice and the clucking of chickens being fed. Pinyon smoke rose into the still air and, mingling with it, the fragrance of roasting meat.

We debated for a moment which aroma was the more delicious and came to no conclusion.

"What mistake did you make this afternoon?" I asked.

"... and I still might be wrong," he said dubiously. "In any way I wish I were. I suppose the brakes on his car *are* all right."

"Frequently, Dagobert, I read your mind. But sometimes it helps if you drop a hint what you're talking about."

"Julian's sedan, of course," he said in an injured tone. "You went to the movies in it last night, didn't you?"

"The brakes seemed grand," I said. "We used them frequently. Probably Julian fixed them exactly as he said."

Julian had stated that that was what he was doing at the time Winthrop had fallen into the well. But Dagobert had been convinced—yesterday—that the brake fluid in the sedan had not been renewed. He had been very pleased with himself at discovering this discrepancy in Julian's story. At the time it seemed to mean something.

I had thought it over several times and come to the conclusion that (a) Dagobert was wrong, (b) it was a meaningless slip of Julian's tongue, (c) Julian did not need an alibi for the time of Winthrop's death, because his alibi for twelve-thirty the night before was unassailable.

"Besides," I said aloud, "he wouldn't kill his own son."

Dagobert said nothing.

"He adored Winthrop. I noticed that first afternoon."

Still Dagobert said nothing. His silences have a rarity value. I stared at him.

"You mean he might——"

"I was thinking about brake fluid," he said. "We may need some."

"We also need a new body, new upholstery, a new engine."

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and a new speedometer," I sighed. "Julian, incidentally, could do with a new speedometer. It's stopped at thirty-five miles an hour." I thought he wasn't listening to me. I had been merely wandering on aloud and hadn't expected him to. But he suddenly woke up. He glanced at me blankly, as though he were perplexed to find me there.

"Say that over again slowly," he said. "The part about Julian's speedometer."

I obeyed.

"Of course!" he exclaimed wonderingly. "Of course! Why don't you ever tell me these things!"

He gave my arm an affectionate but brief squeeze and strode off towards the three horsemen who were dismounting beside the corral. I didn't chase after him. I am not generally so self-effacing, but there are moments in the lives of even the most confident wives when something warns them to leave things to the men. I had seen the look in Dagobert's eyes and recognised it. He had discovered manuscript of Guillaume de Machault. The manuscript turned out to be a fake, but the look was genuine.

I turned back towards the house with a feeling of sick apprehension and unendurable triumph.

For I knew Dagobert knew who had murdered Miranda.

CHAPTER XXX.

I don't know exactly what I expected. Mr. Voigt and Peggy were sitting in the patio, wondering why the rest of us didn't join them for cocktails. At their invitation I sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair and refused a drink, feeling that it would be somehow immoral to accept more hospitality from a family on whom a thunderbolt was about to fall. Bill joined us and asked what had happened to Dagobert and me. I avoided his eye as though I myself were guilty.

I think I was momentarily expecting Dagobert and the Sheriff to arrive and make an arrest. Julian and Hal strolled through the gate and across the patio. Dagobert would, I supposed, appear in another instant.

As a matter of fact I didn't see Dagobert again all evening.

For me, at least, it was an intolerable evening. Whether the others found it so I could not be sure. I was a poor witness; for every remark and gesture that were made seemed an adumbration of what I knew must follow. The shadows lengthened, but I did not perceive the direction they took.

I tried not to think. Of course, the effort was futile. I thought until my brain was sick. What I thought was distorted and largely misleading.

I wondered, as the evening wore on, if my nervous tension were contagious. I was finally sure the others had caught it. Had they caught it from me, or was fatality in the very air? I should have locked myself in my room as Sue had done. But I knew that human companionship was slightly more bearable than being alone. I paid a hundred times for my gregariousness.

For one thing I had to explain Dagobert's absence. He had driven off alone in the jalopy while we were still in the patio. I pretended this was exactly what I'd expected, and explained with horribly false facetiousness that he'd probably chased off to see the glamorous Yolanda.

Julian was sitting beside me, and I could have bitten my tongue out the second I said it. I think he laughed briefly and said: "Surely not, with such a charming wife!" or something equally silly.

Pa Fergusson did not join us. He drove off in his own car shortly after Dagobert, leaving Patrolman Jones discreetly posted across the drive under the shadow of the outbuildings. He was still there after dinner, a dark outline relieved by the occasional glow of his cigarette. He reminded me of that carrion-buzzard which had hovered over the ravine beneath Bald Peak this afternoon.

Sue didn't appear at dinner. Both Peggy and Dwight knocked at her door and offered to bring her a tray, but she said she wasn't hungry. At about nine-thirty Peggy came on to the patio where we were still drinking after-dinner coffee and tapped me on the shoulder.

I was grateful for the interruption, for the desultory conversation had taken an uncomfortable turn. Mr. Voigt, in his blundering way—which was either clumsy or calculated, I wasn't sure which—had begun talking about euthanasia. Was it not an act of kindness, he argued, to kill a person who was suffering from an incurable disease? You shot a horse, didn't you, when it was in pain?

"But a horse is not a human being," Hal had countered unexpectedly. "People have got a soul, and that makes it different."

I followed Peggy into the house. I was a little surprised at Hal's drawing a theological distinction between animals and human beings, having a preconceived idea that he preferred the former. On reflection I decided that Hal was really the most level-headed person in Palo Alto. He alone had seemed to escape to-night's brooding atmosphere and have nothing abnormal on his mind. I could have taken a useful lesson from him in sanity.

Peggy said that she had again tapped on Sue's door. Sue had said she would have some scrambled eggs if it wasn't too much trouble.

"I've made her a tray," Peggy explained, "but she'd rather you or Dagobert took it in to her. . . . God knows what's eating her!"

she added, not very tactfully. "The whims of pregnant women, I guess."

Sue opened the door and, when I had gone in with the tray, locked it behind me. I noticed the door communicating with Dwight's room was also bolted. I glanced at her interrogatively and she flushed slightly.

"I've been sleeping," she said, "and wanted to be alone."

"Yes, of course," I nodded, looking at the undisturbed bed.

"I've a raging headache again," she added. "Where's Dago-bert?"

"I wish I knew," I murmured, as I placed the tray on a small table in front of her arm-chair.

She lifted the silver cover and inspected the scrambled eggs. There was an immense quantity of them, flanked with crisp bacon and tiny grilled sausages. She begged me to stay long enough to have a cigarette. I helped myself from the square gold box on her dressing-table. They were the oval Egyptians with her initials on them. I said they were excellent, and asked her where she got them. She told me. It was a long Greek name with a New York address.

"I'll write it down for you," she offered.

It is a measure of the depths to which our social efforts had sunk that I thanked her effusively and put the address in my skirt pocket, promising to get in touch with Mr. Eumophopolis or whatever it was, at the earliest possible moment.

I finished the cigarette and conversation again languished. I made several attempts to go, but she always stopped me. I had the feeling that she did not want to be left alone.

She had finished the eggs, bacon, and sausages. She ate, noticed, every scrap, even polishing her plate with a crust of bread.

"A relic of starvation days in Greenwich Village," she apologized with a smile. "I always polished my plate to set a good example to Dwight."

Peggy had added a cowboy-sized slice of apple pie and a hun of cheese to the tray, just in case, and now Sue pitched into th

with unabated appetite. She looked so delicate and charming and feminine in her plum-coloured corduroy velvet dressing-gown that the spectacle was a little disconcerting. Perhaps she noticed my metaphorically raised eyebrows, for as she finished and pushed the tray away from her, she laughed.

"The condemned," she said, "made a hearty breakfast."

For some reason I felt a slight shiver run through me. "The condemned?" I repeated in a stupid voice which I meant to be light. Then I said, I don't know why: "What are you frightened of, Sue?"

"Frightened?"

"Yes, frightened. Terrified. Scared stiff!"

"What makes you think I'm frightened?" she said mechanically.

"What on earth have I to be afraid of?"

"That's what I asked."

I watched her. Her expression didn't change. I thought she glanced swiftly at the two locked doors which led into her bedroom; but there was no visible fear in her eyes—only a kind of dazed bewilderment, a lack of comprehension such as I had seen in them this afternoon when she first regained consciousness. A curious thought came into my mind; she was afraid, but she didn't know what of.

"Do you think someone tried to kill you this afternoon?" I asked evenly.

Her reply was equally even. "No. I'm quite convinced no one did. I said so, and I meant it, Jane." For the first time her voice broke slightly. "It wouldn't make any sense," she added in a whisper.

"Not," I said coldly, "unless you know something about the person who murdered Miranda."

"But I don't!" she said quickly.

"So you keep saying. But someone might *think* you knew something. The same person who thought Winthrop knew something!"

I had tried to keep my voice level, to betray nothing of the strain this evening had been for me; but I caught the atmosphere of terror from this locked bedroom as surely as if I were myself

menaced. I stood up, looking, doubtless, like Cassandra amidst the flames of Troy.

"Sue! For God's sake, stop pretending! Your life may be in danger! Don't you understand?"

She shook her head. An immense weariness seemed to have come upon her. "No," she murmured. "No—I do not understand."

I saw her exquisite hand in a familiar gesture brush across her forehead. Her eyes were closed and she lay back in the arm-chair.

"It's my headache," she said. "Please do forgive me, Jane. I'm afraid I'm not entertaining you very well. . . . It's almost unbearable."

I let out my breath slowly and regained a grip on myself. I had, I realised, been a little melodramatic.

"Would you like to go to bed?"

She nodded. "In a minute."

I glanced helplessly around the room and saw the nembutal bottle on her bedside table.

"Can I give you a couple of nembutals?"

She sat up sharply at the word. "No!" She shook her head almost with violence. "No," she repeated more calmly. "No, I'll sleep quite well without them. . . ."

Her voice died away, and I thought for a moment she had actually gone to sleep. She remained motionless in her chair.

"I'll sit with you for a while," I said.

"No, don't bother," she said, without opening her eyes. "I'd rather be alone. . . . Will you take the tray with you and thank Peggy?"

I still hesitated, not fully convinced she really wanted me to leave. She thanked me again for bringing her supper, and eventually I took the tray reluctantly to the door. I unlocked it and pushed it open. In the corridor outside I turned to have a final glimpse at Sue. She was still sitting motionless in the chair, apparently unaware that I had gone. I closed the door softly.

As I tiptoed down the corridor I heard the lock turn sharply behind me. I don't know why, but I was profoundly relieved at the sound.

I took the tray out to the kitchen. Maria and the other servants were still up, although it was now nearly ten-thirty. They too had caught the restlessness of the house.

I walked out to the patio. Dagobert was not there. I walked across to our room. It was dark and forbidding and I did not stay. Even the company of Bill and Voigt in the patio was preferable to this. Patrolman Jones was still at his post, identifiable by the glow of his cigarette. I vented internal irritation on him; if, I said harshly to myself, he wished to be useful, why didn't he sit outside Sue's room!

In the library I ran my eyes aimlessly over shelves of bound Scientific Reviews, not really looking for anything to read. I found in my pocket the slip of paper Sue had written her tobacco-nist's address on. The paper was creamy and heavy, and had deckled edges.

Then I noticed that it was the same paper on which Miranda had written those four words: "One o'clock. Your room."

CHAPTER XXXI

At exactly a quarter to twelve that night the telephone rang. It rang three times—the Palo Alto number. We heard it with a mixture of sinking hearts and quickening pulses, as though all evening this was what we had been waiting for.

No one had gone to bed, though the suggestion had several times half-heartedly been made. I had forgotten I didn't play bridge, and had made up a fourth with Peggy, Voigt, and Julian. The game had quickly deteriorated and died a natural death; Mr. Voigt was showing me a new variety of patience, and Peggy was doodling on the score pad.

Hal had wandered off to chat with Patrolman Jones, and Dwight had been missing for the last hour. He'd had another idea for a song, and was taking his favourite evening stroll up the hill behind the house.

Bill was in the library. The door was open, and I saw him put down his magazine and stare at the telephone as though the instrument were unfamiliar to him.

It continued to ring for a moment, and Julian rose. I followed him into the library, for I knew it must be Dagobert.

It was a trunk call.

Julian lifted the receiver, said hello, and held on for a long minute. I saw his brown fingers flex as they gripped the instrument.

"El Paso?" he repeated in a queer, strained voice. Then added, more normally: "Yes, this is Alamogordo Ten Eight Ten, Ring Three. I'll hold on." He glanced up at me; his eyes were expressionless. "Did Brown go to El Paso?"

Before he had time to answer he had returned to the telephone. "Brown?" he said. "No, it's Rose speaking. Your wife's just here. I'll put you on to her."

He handed me the receiver, and I slipped down on to the arm of an easy-chair, feeling weak in the knees.

"How am I doing?" Dagobert's voice asked cheerfully.

"*What* are you doing?"

His voice changed to a kind of conventional explanatory tone. "I've been held up," he said, "and am spending the night here in El Paso. I'll be home the first thing in the morning."

It was a split second before I recognised the words: they were the same words Julian had used at a quarter to twelve the night Miranda was murdered. I don't know why, but I said, as though I had rehearsed it:

"You *must* come home! You haven't any clothes with you."

Exactly what Miranda had said! With a sense of growing unreality I heard the familiar explanation about picking up a shave in the morning from a barber, and it's being so late. I said:

"It's only a quarter to twelve. If you start right away you'll be home by half-past one."

"That's right," he said equivocally, and rang off.

I joggled the instrument, but the line was dead. I turned around very slowly towards Julian, half dreading to meet his eyes. He must have recognised my words: they were among the last words he had heard his wife pronounce.

He turned on his heel as I glanced at him, and his visible reactions, if any, were lost on me. Bill said, after Julian had abruptly left the room:

"What's Dagobert doing in El Paso?"

That was a point which had only just struck me. "Heaven knows."

"Is he coming back to-night or to-morrow morning?"

"He left it vague," I said. "I suppose I'll have to stay up until half-past one and find out."

The prospect of nearly two hours more of this evening was appalling. I wandered disconsolately out into the patio again. Julian was suggesting that everyone go to bed.

"Don't be silly," Voigt said.

"Why is it silly?" Peggy asked. "I think bed is a fine idea."

"Everyone knows why we're sitting up," Voigt replied. "We're sitting up until we find out who killed Miranda."

Julian turned away. His voice was muffled. "Who said so?"

"Hal said so," Voigt explained simply. "He's nuts, but he's always right."

No one contradicted the statement. I think we were all remembering how Hal had originally foretold the murder.

It was a relief when Dwight came in at that moment. He looked preoccupied and ignored us. He walked into the drawing-room, hesitated at the piano, struck one grating discord, and proceeded towards the back part of the house. It was about ten minutes before he reappeared, and during those ten minutes an inexplicable cold sweat came over me. Even Voigt noticed it and suggested I ought to be wearing a coat. Peggy had on her green cardigan, but I had felt stifled all the evening, and was only wearing a light summer frock.

Dwight again paused at the piano. This time he sat down. I could see his fingers move tentatively over the keys, running soundlessly up and down the keyboard in an unplayed nocturne. Then softly we heard music.

I jumped up, tipping over my chair, unable to bear it a moment longer.

It was the "Liebestod."

"I—" I stammered, conscious that everyone was staring at me. "I—I don't feel very well."

And I fled. I ran through the library, nearly tripping over Bill. I stumbled into the corridor which led towards Sue's room. My heart was beating so hard that I scarcely heard midnight striking. I reached Sue's door and paused to fight down my hysteria.

At that moment the door at the end of the dimly lit corridor began slowly to open. I tried to scream, but I made no sound. The door which opened was Miranda's door. A vague figure materialised and took shape.

I stared at it, petrified. Then I began softly to cry.

The figure was Dagobert.

CHAPTER XXXII

WHEN you waken from a nightmare to find the person you love bending over you, you do not at first wonder where he came from and how he got there. It wasn't until I felt the hard, comforting contact of Dagobert's shoulder and the rough tweed of his jacket against my face that my brain began to thaw.

Dagobert had taken fifteen minutes to make the two-hour return trip from El Paso!

"There is doubtless some perfectly simple explanation of this," I murmured, clinging to him.

He released me gently. In the dim light his face was haggard. "I hate to do this to you, Jane," he said. "In fact, I hate to do this to anyone. Shall we get it over and done with?"

I nodded, wondering why the stimulation which had sustained me all evening had suddenly gone flat. I didn't even want to know who had killed Miranda. It was more positive than that: I wanted *not* to know who had killed Miranda.

We hesitated, feeling in that moment more strange and foreign than we had ever felt in Palo Alto. I would have given a fortune to be snugly at home in Somerset and never to have heard of Miranda Ross. I think Dagobert felt the same way.

While we paused I grew conscious again of the attenuated strains of the "Liebestod" which Dwight was still playing. I met Dagobert's eyes, and caught my breath. The panic which had sent me racing into the house a moment ago crept round again, like a spectre which vanishes in the light only to return with the darkness.

I formed the single word with dry lips: "Sue."

Dagobert tried the handle of her door, but it was locked. I breathed again, and then I remembered.

"There's another door leading in from Dwight's room!"

I must have sounded hysterical, for Dagobert glanced at me with a faint grin.

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I must have sounded hysterical, for Dagobert glanced at me with a faint grin.

Then I noticed Pa Fergusson in the background, sitting alone a few yards up the covered porch in the shadows. He was wearing his black sombrero and chewing the inevitable toothpick. His face was without expression.

Julian was the first person to move. He was sitting on a wicker chair beside Peggy, and I saw him squeeze her hand.

"You've made a remarkably quick trip back from El Paso," he said to Dagobert.

"Yes," Dagobert replied, and for the first time in his life he plainly didn't know what to say next. "We all hate this," he added finally. "Shall we make it quick?"

"If you don't mind," Julian agreed softly.

Voigt suddenly exploded. He struggled from his chair looking like a vessel of wrath.

"For God's sake!" he shouted. "Can't Karnak stop playing that goddam piano for a moment! Karnak! For God's sake, lay off, can't you!"

He poured out the biggest whisky I'd ever seen even him take, and added in the total silence which ensued: "All right, Brown. What the hell's it all about? Get on with it."

Peggy said, in a voice which mingled anxiety with curiosity: "How did you do it, Dagobert? You just called up from El Paso!"

"It wasn't really my idea," Dagobert said. "It was Julian's. I did it the same way Julian did it on Thursday night. Perhaps *he'll* explain."

Voigt choked over his whisky. "Julian!" he muttered. "Well, I'll be damned!" There was a touch of awe in the way he stared at his son-in-law.

"Yeah," Hal murmured, half to himself. "I've been kinda wonderin' how Julian got back that night so soon."

Julian was on his feet, but he did not move. He glanced from Pa Fergusson, who had shifted the toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other, to the rest of us. His face twitched.

"You saw me?" he said to Hal, without looking at him.

"Sure," Hal nodded. "About half-past twelve. I was out moochin' around the corral."

"Jane means this," Dagobert said, producing the slip of paper we had found in Bill's waste-paper basket.

Bill took it and read the words: "One o'clock. Your room," in Miranda's handwriting. His bewilderment deepened.

"But I've never seen this in my life," he said, handing the paper back to Dagobert.

The statement struck me as outrageous, and I marvelled at the certainty with which he made it. I marvelled even more when Dagobert said:

"No, I know you haven't. But I wanted to be sure. When did Miranda tell you she'd come to your room?"

"She told me that afternoon. I was helping her pick roses in the small patio, and she said she *might*—er—come that night."

"Could Julian have overheard the arrangement?"

The colour which had flushed back into Bill's face went again.

"Julian was in their room," he stammered. "I didn't n-notice until I left the small patio. M-Miranda noticed, I think. D-did she make the rendezvous with me so Julian *would* know?"

"Probably," Dagobert said.

He started towards the drawing-room without further comment. I stuck to him as close as I could. Knowing that this would be the last moment's privacy we might have for some while, I said:

"That note was written on the paper in Sue's room."

"Yes," he nodded. "Miranda wrote it there while she was having supper with Sue."

Dwight didn't look round as we passed through the drawing-room. He continued to play the "Liebestod," apparently unaware of our presence. Dagobert glanced at him, hesitated for a second, and then continued towards the french windows leading into the patio. Dagobert's reluctance to face a scene with Dwight continued until the last possible moment.

Peggy, Voigt, Hal, and Julian were all in the patio. All four turned to watch us as we came from the drawing-room. I expected an effect at least as violent as that which Dagobert's appearance had produced on Bill. But no one moved. Again I had that impression I had had yesterday afternoon of a united family, presenting a united front.

therefore demonstrably in El Paso, one hundred and twenty miles from Palo Alto. Actually I was in Pa's Place, exactly one mile away."

He slumped down on the bench beside Hal. He had spoken evenly, almost uninterestedly, as though his words were without personal application. But I could see by the drawn lines of his face that the account had taken its toll on his nerves. Voigt handed him a drink, but he put it down untouched.

"Shall I go on?" he said. "Or will you arrest me for the murder of my wife now?"

"Go on a bit first," Dagobert suggested.

Julian looked at him without resentment. "How did you find out all this? From Yolanda?"

"No, from Jane," Dagobert said unexpectedly. "You said you were renewing brake fluid yesterday in the garage when Winthrop was drowned. I knew you hadn't been doing anything of the sort. Then Jane told me your speedometer was broken. I suddenly realised what you'd been doing in the garage was tinkering with it, probably setting it back two hundred and forty miles so that it should not register that extra trip from El Paso and back. Given the certainty that you had come back from El Paso that night, I couldn't think of any other scheme by which you could establish an alibi. To tell the truth," he added, "Yolanda nearly fainted when I proposed she put through the identical call again this evening that she'd put through last Thursday. . . . You walked up from Pa's Place to Palo Alto. You could have made it by a quarter-past twelve—I cheated, by the way, and used my car. What time did you get here?"

"About half-past twelve," Julian said. "I didn't hurry." He added with a touch of bitterness: "But I was in plenty of time for my wife's murder, if that's what you mean."

"Why did you come back?"

Julian stared at Dagobert as though he hadn't understood the question. Bill, Sue, and Dwight had by this time silently joined us in the patio. They sat on the fringe of the group, listening intently, their faces three white blurs in the shadows. Pa, still keeping his distance, looked as though he had gone to sleep, but

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Julian asked mechanically.

"No one asked me," Hal explained simply. "Anyway, I knew you wouldn't kill Miranda."

Julian walked over to the bench on which Hal was sitting. He put an awkward hand on his half-brother's shoulder, patted it once and turned reluctantly towards us. His face was in the shadow, but I saw that his eyes were bright, as though there were tears in them.

"What I imagine Brown did was this," he said finally. "He drove to El Paso and went to an hotel where he registered and took a room." He paused, glancing towards Dagobert for confirmation.

"The Casa Grande," Dagobert nodded. "The same one you stayed in."

"The Casa Grande," Julian said. "There was someone with him."

"Yolanda again," Dagobert supplied.

"Yolanda," Julian repeated dully. "At about ten o'clock that night—I mean to-night—he left the hotel unobserved by a side entrance and got in his car which was parked in a side street some distance away. He drove to Pa's Place, arriving well before eleven forty-five. He parked his car at a safe distance from Pa's Place and let himself in with Yolanda's key——"

"Actually," Dagobert put in, "Pa let me in himself. On Thursday Pa was at an Oddfellows' meeting, Larry was out on the tiles, and the place was deserted. You let yourself in with Yolanda's key."

Julian shrugged as though he didn't care to argue small points. "All right. At exactly eleven forty-five Yolanda put through a long-distance call to Palo Alto from our room in the Casa Grande. I was at the telephone in Pa's Place, and when I heard it ring the Palo Alto number—three times—I picked up the receiver. As soon as Palo Alto spoke I said hello. Yolanda in El Paso meanwhile held on and said nothing. Miranda and Brown and anybody else who happened to be listening in on the conversation—including the switchboard operator in the Casa Grande—naturally assumed I was speaking from El Paso. At eleven forty-five I was

saw his fingers mechanically playing with the holster of his revolver, and once I saw him glance towards the patio gate where beneath the arch Patrolman Jones leaned with negligent self-importance.

Dagobert had to repeat his question. "Why did you come back?"

Julian's brief laugh jarred on our nerves. "But surely you have had it all figured out already!" he exclaimed. "To murder Miranda, of course."

"Only," Dagobert said quietly, "you didn't murder Miranda."

"Didn't I?" Julian said, finally discovering the whisky Voigt had given him. "That must be a great relief to one and all."

"I suggest," Dagobert continued, undeterred by his sarcasm, "that you came back to give your wife the fright of her life. You believed she had a rendezvous with Bill McFarlan. You knew Peggy was in love with Bill, and you were going to bust up the Miranda-Bill affair once and for all."

Dagobert was pacing back and forth, speaking jerkily. He was considerably more nervous than Julian himself. His anxious voice and the ring of his footsteps on the cobblestones were the only sounds which broke the dead silence. I suffered with him, for I knew he was approaching the point he hated most to reach.

"You would have done anything to stop Miranda from ruining Peggy's happiness. Anything, that is, short of murder. You entered the small patio about half-past twelve. The french windows leading into Miranda's room were unlatched. You drew the curtains back an inch or two. You looked in. What you saw made you recoil so quickly that you forgot to redraw the curtains. They were still partly open the next morning. You ran back to Pa's Place, found your car, drove to El Paso, re-entered the hotel again unobserved, and stayed there until nearly nine the next morning. . . . What did you see in Miranda's room?"

"You're making that part up," Julian muttered, for the first time going ashen white. "I saw—I saw Miranda with a knife in her."

"And *somebody* just leaving the room!"

"Nonsense!"

The word was like the crack of a whip. I saw Peggy half start from her chair, then slowly subside. Dagobert looked exhausted and haggard. His face was shining with sweat. He took a drink from the table uninvited.

"You saw somebody just leaving the room. You caught just a brief glimpse. But enough—or so you thought. So you still think. . . . Look, Julian," he broke off wretchedly, "this will be all over in a few minutes. I'm sorry if I'm mucking it up and making it hell for everybody. . . . You didn't surprise Miranda in a rendezvous as you'd hoped. . . . Actually she *had* made a rendezvous, but she never kept it. It was for one o'clock."

I saw he was nervously fingering the slip of paper with those four words Miranda had written. He fanned himself with it distractedly. He stopped pacing abruptly and handed the slip to Dwight Karnak.

"This is yours," he said.

Dwight stared at it. Then he stared at Dagobert, slowly rising. A deep flush came into his face, and I saw his fists clench.

"Where did you get this?" Dwight rasped.

"You dropped it outside Miranda's room during your fight with Bill," Dagobert said carelessly. "Bill picked it up with a letter he'd dropped and stuffed them both together into his pocket without realising it. Don't try to sock me, because Sheriff Ferguson and Patrolman Jones will probably shoot if you do."

"I've never seen it before," Dwight muttered. It was a mechanical statement and not even meant to be believed.

Dagobert said patiently: "Please don't prolong this. Miranda gave it to you when you came back from your walk that night in your wife's room. When you told us she seemed quite normal Sue probably saw her do it."

He glanced at Sue. Sue confirmed his guess with a brief nod of the head. He took a reluctant step towards her; she was watching him with wide hypnotised eyes in which I could discern no emotion whatsoever. Dagobert seemed unable to meet those eyes. He paused, staring down at his own feet.

"The man Miranda talked so much about that evening was Dwight," he said. "She told Sue that, that . . ."

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The word was like the crack of a whip. I saw Peggy half stand from her chair, then slowly subside. Dagobert looked exhausted and haggard. His face was shining with sweat. He took a drink from the table uninvited.

"You saw somebody just leaving the room. You caught just a brief glimpse. But enough—or so you thought. So you still think. . . . Look, Julian," he broke off wretchedly, "this will be all over in a few minutes. I'm sorry if I'm mucking it up and making it hell for everybody. . . . You didn't surprise Miranda in a rendezvous as you'd hoped. . . . Actually she *had* made a rendezvous, but she never kept it. It was for one o'clock."

I saw he was nervously fingering the slip of paper with those four words Miranda had written. He fanned himself with it distractedly. He stopped pacing abruptly and handed the slip to Dwight Karnak.

"This is yours," he said.

Dwight stared at it. Then he stared at Dagobert, slowly rising. A deep flush came into his face, and I saw his fists clench.

"Where did you get this?" Dwight rasped.

"You dropped it outside Miranda's room during your fight with Bill," Dagobert said carelessly. "Bill picked it up with a letter he'd dropped and stuffed them both together into his pocket without realising it. Don't try to sock me, because Sheriff Ferguson and Patrolman Jones will probably shoot if you do."

"I've never seen it before," Dwight muttered. It was a mechanical statement and not even meant to be believed.

Dagobert said patiently: "Please don't prolong this. Miranda gave it to you when you came back from your walk that night—in your wife's room. When you told us she seemed quite normal Sue probably saw her do it."

He glanced at Sue. Sue confirmed his guess with a brief nod of the head. He took a reluctant step towards her; she was watching him with wide hypnotised eyes in which I could discern no emotion whatsoever. Dagobert seemed unable to meet those eyes. He paused, staring down at his own feet.

"The man Miranda talked so much about that evening was Dwight," he said. "She told Sue that, that——"

"Who's trying to prove you killed her?" Dagobert asked wearily.

"Then why can't I go and see my wife?" Dwight demanded. "She's having a baby."

Dagobert looked at him impatiently. Dagobert had never liked Dwight, but now I saw his face twist in a scowl of sympathy. He said roughly, but without rancour:

"Sit down, Dwight, and try to keep your shirt on. . . . Sue is not going to have a baby. Doctor Carter was quite explicit on that point. *You* are Sue's baby, Dwight. You always have been. You are the one she was so terrified someone was going to take away from her. She originally made up the baby story to counter Miranda's boast that you were her lover. She knew nothing would so enrage Miranda as the thought that you and Sue were going to have a child. I'm sorry, Dwight, but you might as well begin to grow up. . . ."

"Sit down, son," Pa urged, finally rising. "Sit down and take it easy. It's not for me to say so, but what I do say is, no jury ain't goin' to hang anyone for an unpremeditated crime like this."

"Unpremeditated? What about the finger-prints carefully wiped off the knife?" Bill reminded us.

"My Scotland Yard friend here," drawled Pa, putting a heavy hand on Dagobert's shoulder but glancing pointedly at me, "told right from the beginning that the murderer might of worn gloves. He was talkin' through his hat, but I reckon that's just what the murderer done. . . . They tell me, Miss Peggy, that you're used to wearing gloves lately—for fixin' up your hands so they be smooth."

"Yes, I——" Peggy broke off with a deep flush. "Yes, I did" she completed quickly.

"I reckon we all know who gives you the idea," Pa said. "Mrs. Karnak's hands are sure lovely, Julia." He turned to me. "Don't you tell us what you see that black sweater is like. That green sweater Miss Peggy's wearin'?"

Julian didn't reply for a moment. He looked at Susan and then at me, still not quite certain of himself.

"Yes," he said finally. "I *think* I did. I caught just a glimpse of green, but it might not have been her sweater."

"It was," Pa said. "But Miss Peggy wasn't wearin' it. She loaned it that night to Mrs. Karnak. . . ." He put his revolver back into its holster and lowered his bulk with relief down into a chair. "I reckon I'm gonna have to make an arrest," he said in the tone of a man who refers to something he must do the day after to-morrow. "Do you know, I ain't never made an arrest before."

"But Sue was asleep at half-past twelve," Peggy said. "Miranda gave her nembutal, and Dwight saw her asleep with her mouth open just before twelve."

Pa remembered to remove his hat. "Didn't you never pretend you was asleep, Miss Peggy?" he asked mildly. "Sure she took the nembutals—but after twelve-thirty, when maybe she figured she needed them in order to sleep good. . . . No, I'm a liar!" he added. "I *did* make an arrest once. It was a drunk nigger who was kickin' up high jinks in Alamogordo. Did I ever tell you folks that story? It was back in 'thirty-five. No, it must of been 'thirty-six." He scratched his head, and again corrected himself. "Maybe it was 'thirty-five. Yes, I'm sure it was, because that's the year it rained in August. Anyway, there was a meetin' of the Oddfellows that night and I——"

"No!" Dwight whispered. "No! It isn't true. It just isn't true. . . ."

Pa made an effort to ignore him. "I was comin' out with a couple of fellers when suddenly——"

"I didn't love Miranda," Dwight insisted brokenly. "Sue ought to have known that. I've told her—hundreds of times. I only wanted . . . just once, to, to—you know. . . ." He buried his head in his hands.

"To sleep with her," Voigt put in brutally.

"All right. Why not?" Dwight's voice rose aggressively. "I am an artist. I need emotional experience. I need——" His voice broke in a sob. "I need—Sue."

He had struggled to his feet and was groping blindly towards the house. In this way, I imagine, Dwight Karnak had blindly

groped in every emotional crisis of his life—towards Sue, who would comfort, reassure, and *protect* him.

Pa mopped the sweat off his forehead and put a hand on Dwight's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, son, if you didn't like that story I was telling you," he said. "But it ain't polite to interrupt when a man's telling a story. . . ."

Under Pa's pressure Dwight relapsed feebly into his chair. "What are we waiting for?" he asked in a daze. "If you're going to arrest her. . . ." He caught Dagobert's eye. "You knew all this!" he accused him suddenly. "Why did you save her this afternoon! Why didn't you *let* her die?"

"I'm sorry," Dagobert said quietly.

It was the mistake he had told me he had made that afternoon.

Patrolman Jones was the only one of us who echoed Dwight's sentiment: what were we waiting for? The rest of us, I think, instinctively knew. Jones had joined us expectantly, a hand on his revolver. Pa ordered him curtly back to his post, with the first sign of ill-temper he had shown to-night. Voigt regarded Pa with approval.

"Ever think of running for Sheriff, Fergusson?" he asked, handing Pa a drink. "We could do with a good man, for a change."

"A couple of days ago you were trying to get him fired," Peggy remarked.

"Nonsense!" Voigt growled. "I—I merely knew that the one way to keep Pa on the case was to try to get rid of him."

It sounded convincing, but Peggy shook her head. "You were afraid I'd done it," she said. "So was Julian. . . . Shall I make some coffee?"

"Do that, Miss Peggy," Pa agreed hastily. "We all made plenty of bum guesses, I reckon. I once figured it was *him*. . . . I figured he felt he had to—for the sake of the rest of you. If you know what I mean. So Palo Alto would be like it was back in his Mom's day. That's when I went into Alamogordo to make You goin' to make that coffee, Miss Peggy?"

Peggy nodded and disappeared. It was about a quarter of ten.

hour before she returned, carrying a tray with cups and a steaming coffee-pot. At her reappearance Pa broke off the desultory conversation about ranching in which he had tried to engage Julian and Hal. He rose.

We saw him move ponderously and without enthusiasm to the French windows and across the drawing-room. We did not speak again until he returned. He was carrying in his hand a nembutal bottle.

It was empty.

"Maybe we'd better call Doc Carter," he said.

Dwight started up from his trance. "Is she——"

"Sleepin', son," Pa said gently. "Sleepin' sound. . . . Only"—he turned to Dagobert—"this nembutal stuff's kinda poisonous in big doses, ain't it? I guess we'd better get on to the Doc quick—or there won't be nobody to arrest."

Dagobert came back from the library a moment later to report that the telephone was engaged. It was still engaged half an hour later when he tried again. At least Dagobert said it was, and no one tried to argue.

"You can never count on these party-lines," Pa shrugged. "If we can't get ahold of the Doc I guess it's just too bad. . . ."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THERE was a telegram next morning for Dagobert from Detroit. It advised him to report to the factory immediately. "Propose start you at bottom and give you fair but unpreferential opportunity to work your way up. Can find secretarial job for Jane she has knowledge shorthand and typing." It was signed "Au Clotilda."

We therefore started early—for Mexico. We had driven for least an hour before we had our first flat tyre. From his recumbent position in the dust under the rear offside wing Dagobert gave a brief résumé of the life of Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with the social and political background of the stirring times.

I handed him tools and listened, mildly engrossed.

"Did she kill Winthrop too?" I asked.

"Who?" he grunted. "Oh!" He mopped his forehead with an oily rag. "I suppose so. He was in her room that evening during the baby conversation. The atmosphere must have been murderous and he must have felt it. Anyway, his announcement after breakfast the next morning would have made Sue think. Do you remember she and Dwight went riding in different directions the morning and she returned home first? Winthrop was crawling around the edge of the well. A swift, small push would have simplified things for her. But the real point about Pancho Villa was his——"

"What about the riding accident?"

"What about it?" he repeated. "It was an accident. Haven't you ever heard of accidents?" He added more thoughtfully: "I don't think Sue was convinced it was an accident. I think she suspected that Dwight knew the truth and was trying to kill her."

We were a few miles from El Paso when he started violently. For a moment I thought we had left something behind and ran

